

Ammar Ali Jan

# RULE

*by*

# FEAR

**Eight Theses on Authoritarianism  
in Pakistan**

*Foreword by*  
**Tariq Ali**



## Praise for *Rule by Fear*

“Rule *by* Fear is a much-needed primer for progressive politics in Pakistan. Ammar Jan brings together his scholarly insights and experience as an activist in this clearly written and accessible text. It reminds us of Pakistan’s checkered past, yet provides a way forward toward a more egalitarian and socially just future. A must read for those interested in the linkages of the Pakistani state with the colonial era and how this history continues to inform the contemporary period.”

**Kamran Asdar Ali**, *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics and Class Activism in Pakistan 1947-1972*

“Ammar Ali Jan's Rule *by* Fear is an intellectual *tour de force* that provides nuanced theoretical insights into the historical processes of Pakistan's political formations, social complexities and economic upheavals over the last seven decades. Through his rigorous critical analysis, Jan helps set up a plan for revolutionary praxis as young Pakistani students, feminists, farmers, workers, ethno-nationalists and human rights activists seek to transform the country's outlook for a better future, an egalitarian society and a radical democracy.”

**Ali Usman Qasmi**, *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan*

“Rule by Fear is a compendium of all the hidden, progressive stories of Pakistan that fundamentally reads as a love story for the people of Pakistan, particularly students and workers who have been systematically denied any right to call themselves Pakistani because of politicians and military leaders who pose as if they are the only groups who can protect Pakistan against the many threats to its security. Jan traces this constant state of fear of attack back to the colonial period. He argues that the military and certain politicians are only able to portray this threat as new, and themselves as the true protectors of Pakistan’s integrity, and win “... the battle of ideas” because they rob “the public of its own past”. Jan’s book illustrates precisely that past. A fantastic feat by an activist-academic who has worked tirelessly to stand by the ideals he believes in. Ammar Jan has written a book that will be, for years to come, a sourcebook for social historians who are searching for the hidden histories of progressive Pakistan.”

**Anushay Malik**, *Narrowing Politics: The Labour Movement in Lahore, 1947-1974*

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Ammar Ali Jan is a historian who works on communist thought in the non-European world. He is a member of Haqooq-e-khalq Movement, an anti-capitalist organisation that is working among workers, farmers, students and women to build an alternative political project. He has been implicated in a number of cases for his activism, including under the notorious sedition law in 2019. He is also a regular contributor to a number of publications, including *The News International*, *Al Jazeera* and *Jacobin*.

**RULE *by* FEAR**

**EIGHT THESES *on*  
AUTHORITARIANISM  
*in* PAKISTAN**

**AMMAR ALI JAN**



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*For the young political workers,  
who continue to dream  
and  
fight for an egalitarian and just Pakistan*



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*Foreword*

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## FOREWORD

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### The Tyranny of the Present

**H**ow do ideas change? And when they do, how does this affect politics, power, culture, mass consciousness, etc? The cultural domain, broadly defined, is the arena in which changes occur, but if this space is blocked to prevent newer ideas from emerging, the society seizes up. It begins to die slowly from the head downwards. This process started in Pakistan during the Frankenstein years of the Zia dictatorship [1977—1988], itself the outcome of the break-up of Pakistan in 1971 and the polarisation in Afghanistan. I have written about all this at length in my three books on the country. What needs to be registered lucidly is that there was no serious attempt to reverse the course. The civilian governments that followed Zia failed miserably. General Musharraf's attempted modernisation à la Kemal Atatürk proved stillborn, and two serious assassination attempts brought him down to the realities of what his predecessor had created.

If the truth be told, it was General Zia who created a 'Naya Pakistan'. The current version is counterfeit. During Zia's rule, the most delicate and sensitive areas of public life were institutionally brutalised. The public floggings of dissenting journalists, the public hangings, the closing down of *sufi* shrines, banning of festivals that went back hundreds of years and where mass participation in the form of dancing and singing were the only forms of freedom enjoyed by the peasants. The strict control of *mushairas* [public poetry readings] in the cities where different social classes mingled to appreciate poetry and cheer the poets whose verses challenged the existing order while retaining their lyricism. Faiz's *Hum Dekhen Ge*, [We Shall See], a universal hymn in this genre. The assault on women's rights, the most notorious of which were the patriarchal amendments to the

Constitution on rape and related matters and the imposition of a cultural-religious dictatorship inspired by (and designed to please) Saudi Arabia. All this remains and is refracted in the everyday lives of the people. The new ideas that sometimes emerge are either co-opted or handed over to NGOs to ensure their marginalisation and atomisation. The feet still allowed to march in the streets and the hands still permitted to carry banners demanding good things and an end to the bad will never be allowed near the levers of real power.

How have new ideas and shifts in mass public opinion arisen in the past? They have, in most cases, resulted from a combination of intellectual activity and the traditions and eruptions of mass dissent. The intellectual craftsmen/women often laid down a challenge decades before the combination worked. The Puritan preachers launched the English Revolution; the Enlightenment thinkers were rain-bearing clouds that fertilised French soil in 1789 and then moved away to let in the sunshine; the Marxist tradition was the basis of the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that accelerated decolonisation and the rise of anti-imperialist movements across five continents. All this should be an encouragement to those working away in specialist laboratories to change minds in every sphere: political philosophers, historians for whom history is not the blind worship of accomplished facts but a torch that lights up the past to offer a better future, artists of every variety, satirists and dramatists and polemicists. They are what we need to ascertain which way the wind blows. Their voices must become part of a national debate because they ask why and where and how, questions that are not fashionable in mainstream discourse — either in the media or the academy — and are consigned to the margins. Worth remembering that marginal notes can sometimes become the main text.

Ammar Ali Jan, one of the most gifted socialist intellectuals in Pakistan today, is also an activist, engaged in defending the poor, the minorities, women and all others whose voices have become whispers. The essays are a reflection on Pakistan's tormented history and its tyrannised present. His forthright style, his refusal to kowtow before authority has led to a ban. He is not allowed to teach. He has been locked up, only released after a High Court Judge declared the charges to be baseless. Oppressive colonial laws

remain on the statute book. The essays are refreshing, written not only for those who were radicalised during the 2019-20 student upsurge that swept the country but for any and every citizen who is puzzled and bewildered by the state of the country. I hope this book will find a readership inside the Army as well and in every rank. For, after all, this is the institution that dominates political life in the country and its education must be a prime concern.

The poor in Pakistan are not stupid. They have an inquiring spirit and a political instinct that often surpasses that of the most educated bureaucrats. There are many instances, but one has never left my memory. During the early 80's, there was unrest in the interior of Sindh. The peasants had been horrified by Zia's decision to hang Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and demonstration took place regularly. Paramilitarised police units were called in to crush the movement. They had been taught to taunt the Sindhi protestors by questioning their loyalty to the Pakistani state and repeatedly shouting that 'Your Bhutto's mother was a Hindu.' This was a well-known fact and the response was simple: 'She converted to Islam.' And that was usually that, but one day a policeman repeated the supposed slur with real anger in the face of an elderly and illiterate Sindhi peasant woman. She remained calm for a minute and then shouted: 'Silence. See if any of you bastards can answer my question.' Silence prevailed. The woman asked: 'Was our Prophet's mother a Muslim?' No answer was forthcoming. Here we have an example of political anger prompting a spontaneous dialectical question that had, till then, not occurred to even the most radical intellectual or PPP *jiyala*. When questions like these become generalised, change will come.

Tariq Ali  
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# INTRODUCTION

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## A CRISIS FORETOLD

**T**his book stems from my experience as an academic and activist in Pakistan. I returned to Lahore in 2016 with a commitment to teach at public sector universities. Despite the neglect and abandonment of the public sector, it was a pleasant surprise to witness students from the most peripheral regions of the country encountering each other and pursuing higher education with incredible passion. Seeing dozens of students sitting on the lawns at Government College University Lahore and Punjab University discussing Iqbal, Faiz, Marx, Hegel, Ambedkar, Luxemburg and many other intellectual giants gave me immense faith in the capacity of our youth. It was clear that something new was germinating in the womb of our society, fuelled by an intense desire to understand and transform the world we inhabit.

At the same time, tensions were brewing on campuses. Since the ban on student unions in 1984, universities have become some of the most securitised spaces in the country, regulated by armed security guards as well as a dense network of intelligence operatives. This situation is a reflection of the anxiety of the state as the memory of student revolts of previous decades still haunts its subconscious. Every day there are confrontations between inquisitive youth and an intrusive security apparatus that routinely disrupts study circles, accuses students of being part of secret conspiracies, moral polices young women and intimidates students who have a tendency to speak back.

This antagonism has appeared in a spectacular manner in a number universities across the country. In April 2017, the university administration at Mardan University orchestrated the lynching of Mashal Khan on false blasphemy charges after he exposed corruption on campus, an astonishingly

cynical use of religion that sent a shock wave and despondency throughout the country. In January 2018, while teaching at Punjab University I witnessed a right-wing student group target progressive students (particularly Pashtuns), dragging them out of their classrooms and beating them with steel rods. Rather than investigating the underlying causes for the prevalence of violence on campus, the Punjab government used anti-terror legislation to punish students, arresting nearly the entire Pashtun student body on campus, an abhorrent (and racist) example of collective punishment. During the same period, anti-terror laws were also used to quell movements led by workers and farmers, blurring the distinction between a dissenting citizen and a terrorist.

Since then, I have witnessed a number of instances of state brutality towards students. On December 1, 2019, one of my students, Alamgir Wazir, was jailed on sedition charges for merely demanding the right to unionise. Similarly, on January 29, 2020, another student, Mohsin Abdali, was abducted and tortured by the security agencies. I was personally dismissed from Punjab University in 2018 without due process – a result of pressure from the deep state that accused me of “fanning anti-state sentiments”, an allegation that later turned into legal proceedings when I was personally charged with sedition in 2019. The allegation of treason is being used widely against a host of prominent social activists, journalists, politicians and even former prime ministers, signaling an intensifying crisis of political legitimacy in Pakistan. With fear and paranoia fuelling the anxiety of the state, and with more young people refusing to surrender, it became clear that the country was headed towards more clashes.

### **Rule of Fear and Violence**

Today Pakistan is in the grip of extreme political and social suffocation, which can only be understood as a silent martial law. Journalists are abducted, powerful television channels are censored, political parties are crushed and activists are hounded. The silencing of dissent intensified with the rise of Imran Khan, itself one of the most manufactured mandates in recent history. Since he assumed power, the process of authoritarianism has only accelerated, with more curbs on the media, a clampdown on academia reminiscent of the Zia era, and a pervasive climate of fear and paranoia across the country.

This cruel *status quo* is widely dubbed a “hybrid regime”. The rules are consistent with a number of similar formations from our beleaguered past. A weak prime minister was brought to power with support of the entrenched military establishment. The PM has the capacity to attack civilian political opponents but is not permitted to utter a word on the corruption or misuse of power by the commanding Generals. An example is the recent case involving General Asim Bajwa, who secretly ran an empire of Papa John’s restaurants across the US. Despite the uproar by opposition parties, the matter was swiftly buried and the General was retained as the head of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, a \$67 billion project involving multiple investments. Any mortal charged with massive fraud would have been deemed unworthy of leading such a project, but the “sanctity” of the military means that the generals are granted endless concessions.

We must remember that ideology veils itself through the language of neutrality and objectivity. Its aim is to create a point of fixation for the public that prevents them from deciphering the situation in its entirety. Ideology has the role of manipulating the genuine sentiments of the public in the service of the ruling order. Other than the use of Islam for political purposes, the phrase “corrupt politicians” is an ideological instrument used by the ruling system to veil the structure within which this corruption is embedded, foreclosing the possibilities of a genuine political debate. One of the aims of this book is to widen the ambit of discussion by focusing on the systemic exploitation, gangsterism, militarism, extremism and lawlessness that shapes our political economy, locating “corrupt politicians” as symptoms of a dangerous disease.

Perhaps the most vivid and disturbing example of the ruling system’s logic can be seen in the province of Balochistan that is under the control of the military, its economy asphyxiated by relentless exploitation and its political life haunted by increasing cases of enforced abductions. Similarly, former FATA remains a theatre of direct and proxy wars, perpetually destabilising society and uprooting hundreds of thousands of Pashtuns from their homelands. To make matters worse, Pakistani elites and ordinary people inhabit different worlds, with the former living in gated communities cut off from the rest of Pakistan. This spiritually bankrupt and financially corrupt system is maintained by excessive policing of the general

population, inscribing militarisation onto the material infrastructures of our everyday life. This spatial apartheid and excessive violence against dissenting forces points to a dystopian future.

What is evident to any keen observer is that Pakistan is not ruled in a manner consistent with existing theoretical frameworks. There is no separation of institutions, policy-making depends on the whims of powerful men and activists are targeted with a vengeance more suited to 18<sup>th</sup> century feudal lords than to a modern state. The general tendency today is to view dissidents as enemies, extracting them from the national political community and permitting unrestrained acts of cruelty upon them. The country is becoming ungovernable, prompting the ruling classes to crush any real or imagined opposition while tightening their hold on power.

While increasing paranoia of the “hybrid regime” unleashes violent repression by the coercive state apparatus, the state is also intensifying its focus on controlling the thoughts of its citizenry. The urgency of this project can be gauged by the fact that state officials term dissenting views as “fifth generation warfare”, a form of war that allegedly aims to overwhelm the enemy through propaganda by fifth columnists. It follows that those criticising policies are working on a hostile agenda controlled by external enemies of Pakistan, and hence do not represent a legitimate opinion. Increasingly, all opinions that differ from those in power are being brought into this category, signaling further erosion of debate and dialogue in an already suffocated society.

### **War of Narratives**

It appears that the ruling classes have read about Althusser’s thesis that the class struggle must be perpetually fought in the realm of ideas.<sup>[1]</sup> The state has imposed a singular narrative about our past and present, obliterating ethnic and religious identities that do not conform to the official narrative. On the other hand, it has also launched a concerted effort to prevent citizens from imagining alternative trajectories for being and belonging. One of the key methods of winning the battle of ideas is by robbing the public of its own past, particularly from the traditions of resistance that sustain ideas of freedom and justice. The aim is to completely disorient the youth so that they are overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty, compelling them to seek protection from the state itself.

As mentioned earlier, the manner in which the word “corruption” is used in public discourse is emblematic of the intellectual decay in society. The word has been used historically to attack civilian governments by pointing out the financial corruption of their leaders. While there is no doubt that elected leaders have made fortunes enriching themselves from the public exchequer, this criticism is almost never extended to the country’s powerful military despite its own massive financial empire. Instead, the military has the de facto power of selectively nominating those who are corrupt and those deemed patriotic, overseeing a revolving door in which civilian leaders continue to be manufactured and discarded. Yet, the basic infrastructure of power remains intact, with all its cruelty and exploitation.

The bigger tragedy is that the fixation on individual corruption prevents us from identifying, let alone debating, the different mechanisms through which the ordinary Pakistanis are exploited. There is hardly any discussion on the direction of the country’s economy, which is run by an exclusive group of technocrats inspired by the neoliberal Washington Consensus and who occupy key decision-making positions in every government. Similarly, the intensifying climate crisis, the horrifying femicide against Pakistani women and the deepening identity crisis faced by the youth hardly registers in mainstream political discourse. Therefore, corruption is indeed a problem in Pakistan, but not only in the limited sense of financial embezzlement by civilian leaders. Corruption also includes the monopoly of a few civilian and military elites over the country’s resources, replacing constitutionalism with gangsterism, rigging elections and overthrowing governments, using religion for cynical purposes, and deploying brutal violence against dissenting voices.

These issues require more than two-minute sound-bites that mark our censored media landscape. Yet, such discussion is repressed by positing an impoverished definition of corruption that masks rather than reveals the actual decay in society. By limiting the ambit of discussion, the ruling elites conveniently keep the public’s focus on manufactured enemies whose elimination appears as a possible solution to the country’s woes. When repression fails to instill genuine change (like addressing the pathetic state of the economy), the absence of alternative discourse means that failure is taken as a sign that we have been too lenient. “Kill them!” “Hang them

publicly!” These are the cries of an agitated public that is right to be indignant but is not allowed to think beyond the insular frameworks provided by those in power.

A penchant for violence has replaced sober analysis of Pakistan’s contemporary crisis, let alone debate on ways out of it. If we are in the midst of a war of ideas, our rulers have successfully managed to disarm the people by policing their thoughts through fear and manipulation. The perpetual creation of phantoms and fictions means that people are compelled to see only symptoms of the crisis, whereas the real processes driving these changes remain invisible to the public eye. The history of grassroots resistance is either suppressed or is disarticulated from its context to show that people were naïve to join the democratic movement, fuelling further pessimism. The result is that despite experiencing terror in our everyday lives, we are unable to even theorise our experiences, let alone prepare to transform the systems that structure our lives.

### **Preparing to Fight Back**

It is evident that the people have the desire to fight back. Our aim should be to build perspectives that widen the scope of enquiry and focus on themes that are purposefully ignored or repressed by those in power. From Hegel to Marx to Freud, modern thinkers have stressed that what is hidden is often more essential to unlocking the truth of a situation than the officially sanctioned appearances. We must remain critical of the reality constructed by those in power and instead focus on opening up autonomous spaces for rethinking the coordinates of our very existence.

This new way of perceiving reality must be premised upon actually existing struggles of the people, a point of departure radically at odds with the existing logic of governance. It means following the trajectory, tragedy and creativity of the persistent struggles between oppressed masses and the ruling authorities, a struggle between the suffocation of the old world and the emancipatory promise of a new world. The conflict between these tendencies exists in reality, in the everyday battles involving different protagonists of the political theatre. Yet, while the state has formulated a powerful vocabulary to delegitimise resistance, we have not done the necessary work to build a new language adequate to the ongoing and coming struggles in Pakistan.

In this manner, our role cannot be limited to proposing immediate, knee-jerk solutions, a widespread tendency today that remains an obstacle to deeper reflection. Instead, we should view existing conflicts over class, social oppression, identity and other fault lines as signs of a deep impasse. In other words, we have answers without questions, responses without identifying the stimuli, symptoms without knowing the disease. Posing the correct questions for existing movements is the most crucial task of political education, since without apprehending the source of our impasse, we will remain condemned to momentary outbursts of rebellion followed by rapid defeats. Sustaining political commitments require serious reflection on the causes of the revolt, developing an alternative programme and an honest debate on coalitions needed to overcome the inevitable backlash. We must turn towards this important task of reconstructing the questions that can orient us towards new, better horizons.

### **Reconstruction of Political Thought**

In order to develop a sharper lens into the contemporary moment, we must dislodge existing conceptual categories in our politics that neither correspond to reality nor are useful in our struggle. To this end, this book focuses on three key dimensions of our political discourse that need to be displaced and overturned before we commence the journey of reconstructing political thought.

First, I contest the mystifications and distortions propagated by the state. This task is most obvious but also most challenging. The challenge comes not only from the reach and resources available to the state's propaganda machine, which is able to manipulate large numbers of individuals despite the mediocrity of its narrative. It also stems from the real or perceived threat of state violence if one crosses the red lines (or if the red lines cross you). In the midst of pervasive misery and discontent, the current consensus is held together under the persistent threat of bodily pain upon dissidents.

In order to challenge the simplified version of reality offered by the dominant order, I aim to unearth the causes of systemic violence in Pakistan and their corresponding political forms. When the state uses terms such as "corruption", "sedition" and "terror" it prevents us from investigating the "political project" for which these categories are deployed, masking its

cynicism under the veil of national security. By focusing on the specificities of authoritarian politics, we shall grasp the underlying content that fuels the paranoia and viciousness of the state. This task entails examining the precise relationship between citizens and the state, studying contradictions within the state, interrogating the exploitation of the working class, and scrutinising moral anxieties of the public that are exploited by the ruling elites. In other words, rather than pinning the blame on individuals or even on specific governments, I identify a broader logic of power working to subjugate and exploit ordinary people.

Second, I push back against the narrative of opposition parties claiming that elected governments alone can resolve the contradictions of Pakistan. Indeed, one must tactically stand with parties that have (momentarily) fallen out of favour from the military establishment because we all need political fronts to defend ourselves against the violent state machinery. Political contradictions are always in motion and political analysis and tactics must be grasped in a dynamic manner. To insist, however, that the entire logic of governance will be overturned simply by allowing existing political parties to take back power is grossly mistaken, both in terms of the history of elected governments and in terms of the lack of plans to address the intensifying crises today and into the future.

I suggest that the disappointment felt by the public when opposition parties come to power is not a result of a betrayal. As these parties lack any serious economic or political alternative, they merely seek to integrate themselves into the ruling logic rather than to initiate ruptures from it. Broader disappointment is a result of the illusion that these tightly controlled and elite-driven parties have the potential to fight a colonial apparatus geared towards crushing its opponents. Most political contestation remains within the coordinates of the existing system, resulting in the perpetuation of exploitation and repression even under civilian governments. In other words, the old civil versus military divide is no longer sufficient to address the enormity of challenges we face since the objective tendency of the system is towards brutal oppression, irrespective of the form of government constituted in Islamabad.

Finally, the search for new horizons necessarily points toward the Left, a tradition that has always insisted upon a dialectical vision of progress, with both advances and regressions in political struggle. At its most radical,



the Left is the only political tradition capable of engaging with the uncertainties of the world since it aims to create a new order. It is a tradition of rupturing from tradition, a politics that seeks to create novel coordinates for measuring the ethics and values of life itself. It is this tradition that I identify with, even though I suggest it requires serious reformation from within.

For too long, the Left has shown more fidelity to texts written by giants from the communist tradition than to rethinking theory based on the ongoing struggles of ordinary people. The fall of the Soviet Union shattered many certainties of the Left, depriving us of clear identifiable models for political development. The result is that we cannot mimic economic, political and strategic debates that took place elsewhere. This ostensible loss is also an incredible intellectual opportunity since we have the choice of constructing new contours of Left politics adequate to meet the challenges of our time.

My wager is that we must reconstruct radical political thought premised upon the existing balance of forces and the trajectories opened up by new social movements. We need a creative and improvisational subjectivity that builds a New Left politics, weaving together different indices of pain into a common political project. This does not entail rejecting theory but requires a more pro-active and dynamic relation between ideas and practice, thus accumulating the wisdom of past struggles to prepare for future battles.

### **Structure of the Book**

My aim is not to provide an exhaustive history of Pakistani politics or peoples' resistance. Numerous other notable efforts have been made in this regard.<sup>[2]</sup> My aim is to propose a conceptual vocabulary to aid us in comprehending the crisis we find ourselves in order to chart a path through it. In that vein, this is an explicitly political work written as a polemic against the organised and heavily funded propaganda machine of the state. I say this without regret since I posit that objective reality itself is constituted by class struggle between opposing camps that view politics, ethics and economics differently. Neutrality is an illusion manufactured by governments to solidify the dominant order. In that sense, this work unabashedly attempts to take the side of the oppressed.

The book comprises eight essays on crucial themes for understanding politics in Pakistan. Each essay ends with a thesis summarising the salient argument in the essay. This structure was followed keeping in mind the need for both brevity and clarity for the readers. While each essay explores a different theme, the connecting thread is the rising authoritarianism that marks political life in Pakistan. As suggested earlier, my aim is to show that the fear and repression we witness today not only has a long genealogy but is also structurally intertwined with the rhythm of social, economic and political life in Pakistan. Only when we grasp the various facets of this oppression are we able to create effective coalitions that can fight and defeat the ruling classes and colonial institutions of this country.

Many of the themes are perhaps also applicable to other countries in the contemporary world, particularly in terms of the intensifying crisis of liberalism, the rise of a transnational oligopoly and the frequent invocation of “external threats” to justify suspension of human rights. Moreover, the rise of xenophobia and Far-Right movements in countries as diverse as the US, India, Brazil, Hungary and the Philippines shows that the crisis of democracy is intertwined with the deepening crisis of global capitalism. The inability of our unjust and unequal system to offer a dignified life to large sections of the population has put more people under militarised control and deprivation, eroding many civil liberties in the process. A permanent State of Emergency haunts the world.

Pakistan is an important case study for imagining the contours of a global future precisely because a heightened sense of emergency has gripped our lands since colonial times, pushing us into the vortex of arbitrary rule. In that sense, the fate of Pakistan is tied to that of the rest of the world, not least because our rulers sustain themselves through aid from imperialist powers in exchange for acting as a rentier state in the region. The struggle for freedom, dignity and equality in Pakistan can only truly be conceived in the global theatre, especially since climate change and COVID-19 are showing us how intimately our lives are connected to people around the globe.

Despite decades of defeat, discontent among the youth is rising. Social movements are erupting across society due to the sheer exhaustion of ordinary people at the hands of a decadent system. Clashes of historic scale between the guardians of the *status quo* and the revolting masses are on the

horizon. States are using intimidation and manipulation as a tool to both organisationally and intellectually disarm the public. The need for intellectual rearmament of the people through debates and discussion has become urgent. I hope that this work makes a contribution in equipping our side for this necessary fight.

Ammar Ali Jan  
7 September 2021  
Lahore

## PERMANENT STATE OF EMERGENCY

*I fired and continued to fire until the crowd dispersed, and I consider this is the least amount of firing which would produce the necessary moral and widespread effect it was my duty to produce if I was to justify my action. If more troops had been at hand, the casualties would have been greater in proportion. It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd, but one of producing a sufficient moral effect from a military point of view not only on those present, but more especially throughout the Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity.*

General Reginald Dyer, 1919

In April 1919, Punjab was in the grip of a mass anti-colonial upsurge that shook the “foundations of British Rule” and posed the greatest challenge to foreign domination in India since the War of Independence of 1857. The moment was a consequence of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which hundreds of civilians were butchered on the orders of General Reginald Dyer, the commandant of the infantry brigade in Jalandhar. The victims’ crime was that they had violated a curfew imposed on the city by gathering for the annual spring festival of Baisakhi. Dyer surrounded the site of the festival and ordered his soldiers to indiscriminately fire on the assembled crowds, setting a deadly example for those who crossed red lines set by the colonial state.<sup>[3]</sup>

The threat of ensuing protests resulted in the imposition of what historians term “fanciful punishments”. These punishments included spectacles such as parading all the students and faculty of the Santam Dharam College in Lahore in the hot sun and then detaining them at the Red Fort for 3 hours. Their only misconduct, if it can be termed as such,

was that they happened to study in a college whose walls were defaced with anti-government slogans. Similarly, a local military commander in Gujranwala issued his infamous “saluting orders”, requiring all inhabitants of the city to leave their preoccupation whenever they witnessed a European officer and stand to salute them.

This logic of collective humiliation was even more dramatically evident in the orders forcing residents of Amritsar to literally crawl across streets as revenge for the alleged harassment of a European woman. The aim of such extraordinary punishments was to create a generalised fear that would remind the colonised subjects of their proper place – perpetual subordination to foreign rule and the repressive state apparatus. In cases of disobedient subjects continuing to challenge colonial authority, there was also the option of pure annihilation. In 1919, Gujranwala became the first site in the world to suffer aerial bombardment in peacetime, followed shortly by a similar bombing campaign in Waziristan, demonstrating the thin line separating peace and war in colonial India.

These incidents were symptomatic of the fear and paranoia that shaped colonial governance. The British paid lip-service to development and enlightenment as part of the civilisational mission but when the masses demanded equality and self-rule, the pedagogical project was replaced by pure terror. This terrifying legacy of violence shaped the consciousness of British officials who never felt confined by law or morality, thus supervising an arbitrary form of control over the masses.

Legal historian Nasser Hussain explains how the relationship between legal and extra-legal violence collapsed in the colonies, which were constantly placed under a state of emergency. This exceptional situation was propelled by the deep sense of fear among colonial elites who felt that a movement for a specific demand could quickly escalate into an open rebellion against the entire state, revealing the fragility at the heart of colonial terror.<sup>[4]</sup> The result was the perpetuation of cruel and whimsical forms of punishment meted out to indigenous populations whenever the state felt that its authority was challenged. The aim was not to punish a particular crime but to create a general sense of fear that could deny dignity of colonised subjects and force them into submission. Militarised control of

the masses was a logical outcome of this paranoid and violent structure of governance.

### **Dictatorship in the Post-Colony**

Despite formal independence, the postcolonial state of Pakistan inherited the colonial structure of governance. This was in part due to the manner in which power was transferred to entrenched elites rather than to social groups exploited and marginalised under colonial rule. In other words, independence from the British did not uproot the social hierarchies that shaped colonial India. Consequently, the new rulers of the postcolonial state reproduced the ideological dimension of colonial rule, including an intense fear of the masses and a propensity to control populations through brute force. This anti-people ruling alliance led many progressive groups to become disillusioned from the newly independent states, deeming this transfer of power a “farce”.<sup>[5]</sup>

The myriad cultural, political and economic challenges faced by Pakistan were quickly framed in terms of an “emergency” that supposedly posed an existential threat to the state. It is not surprising that in the initial years of the country provincial governments in NWFP and Sindh were dismissed, a military operation was launched in Balochistan, language protests were violently suppressed in Bengal and dissent was muzzled, including through a ban on the Communist Party of Pakistan in 1954. This authoritarianism was justified in the name of the “exceptional circumstances” facing the country, a category that increasingly became intertwined with “national security” in Pakistan.

Unfortunately, this sense of perpetual crisis and heightened fear has shaped the unconscious of the state apparatus in Pakistan, where exceptional circumstances are repeatedly invoked to justify the suspension of the law and the imposition of emergency rule. The expression ‘*Mulk naazuk soortehaal se guzar raha hai*’ (the country is passing through a precarious situation) defines our existence, capturing the permanent state of emergency faced by the country’s citizens. The propensity to rule through extra-legal and violent methods delayed the formation of Pakistan’s constitution for almost a decade in which bureaucrats, elite politicians and military generals colluded to prevent representative government and suppress political opposition. While a constitution was finally promulgated

in 1956, it was suspended in October 1958 on the eve of the country's first general elections, paving the way for the first nationwide martial law in Pakistan's history.

The decree to abrogate Pakistan's Constitution was passed by President Iskander Mirza, a former military general and key figure in the early years of the young country. In a language reminiscent of colonial paternalism, Mirza believed Pakistanis were not ready for democracy, that the country was besieged by external and internal enemies and that only a proclamation of emergency could save Pakistan. After imposing emergency rule, he advised the "nation's enemies" to leave the country as they would not be spared the wrath of his patriotic government. Three weeks later, his own Chief Martial Law Administrator, General Ayub Khan, mounted a coup against his government, ousting Mirza from power. Mirza was forced to leave Pakistan to live a life of ignominy in the UK, passing away in 1969 without ever being allowed to return to his homeland.

While Iskander Mirza's flirtation with authoritarianism proved to be embarrassingly brief, the themes of controlled democracy and internal/external dangers far outlived his political career. General Ayub reigned over a US-backed dictatorship until 1969 by invoking both the impossibility of "Western style democracy" in Pakistan and the necessity of guarding against "enemies of Pakistan". His successor, General Yahya Khan, held the country's first general elections in December 1970, a decision that proved to be even costlier than the denial of elections in 1958. The Bengali population of East Pakistan chose "wrongly" by electing the Awami League, a party led by an outspoken critic of the military's policies, Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman. The unexpected result prompted a genocidal military operation against the people of East Pakistan and eventual dismemberment of the country through the creation of Bangladesh.

Pakistan's early years reflected the intensity of fear etched into the subconscious of the ruling classes whenever the specter of popular politics was raised. The mere possibility of an undesirable election result could lead to the suspension of law while triggering repressive martial laws or brutal military operations. General Zia-ul-Haq, perhaps Pakistan's most tyrannical military dictator, summed up the mentality of dictators and their backers when he was asked by reporters about when he planned to hold general elections in the country. "When I can be assured that people will choose

wisely and responsibly”, he responded without any sense of irony. There could not have been a better representation of colonial paternalism towards the masses by military elites in the “post-independence” period.

Pakistan’s third and current constitution was implemented on March 23, 1973, a constitution approved by the Constituent Assembly formed after the 1970 elections. Despite its formidable achievement in formulating a new constitution, this assembly itself lacked moral legitimacy after more than half of its members ceded to the newly created state of Bangladesh following the military government’s refusal to recognise and respect their mandate. To their shame, a vast majority of West Pakistani legislators, including the leader of the House, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, refused to accept the mandate of their Bengali colleagues and supported the military’s operation to crush popular sentiment in East Pakistan.

### **Crisis of Legitimacy**

The 1973 Constitution has remained permanently or partially suspended for most of its existence. Military rulers such as General Zia and General Musharraf abrogated the Constitution to give impunity to their monstrous regimes. But even during more democratic periods, sections of the Constitution have remained suspended due to the “exceptional circumstances”, allowing for unmitigated violence against political opponents. Perhaps one of the most ironic suspensions of constitutional rule was undertaken by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto himself, the architect of the 1973 Constitution, who dismissed the provincial government headed by his rival parties in Balochistan merely one year after the passing of the constitution. Accusing the left-wing National Awami Party (NAP) of being “foreign agents”, Bhutto banned NAP, arrested the party’s leadership and launched a brutal military operation in Balochistan against “Pakistan’s enemies”.

Such authoritarianism by an elected leader and the founder of the constitution indicates how fear and violence shaped the logic of governance irrespective of the form through which a government was established in Islamabad. It also points to a deep crisis of legitimacy that continues to haunt the postcolonial state. In order to create durable order and popular consent, a political system must propose a broad “worldview” to justify its existence. This could be in the guise of a monarchy that invokes divine providence, a constitutional order claiming to reflect the popular will, or



even a pledge of allegiance to a revolutionary process. In any case, the idea of the sacred remains essential to political legitimacy, necessitating a role for political theology even in secular, modern times.

Pakistan's case is particularly illuminating in how it overtly tries to bring together the modern and the theological dimension of political legitimacy. It is an Islamic Republic in which sovereignty belongs to Allah, but where this sovereignty needs to be translated through popular participation in democratic institutions. Such formalisation of religious power in the legal apparatus has led to accusations that Pakistan is a theocracy. At deeper inspection, however, our problem might be the opposite.

Despite the fact that the constitution seeks to represent the sovereignty of Allah, it has not stopped military generals and autocratic democrats from suspending this supposedly divine form of sovereign power. Such brazen defiance not only shows the emptiness of constitutional proclamations, but also demonstrates the impotence of religious symbolism in the corridors of power. Suspending God's constitution in the name of "exceptional circumstances" shows that far from being a theocracy, Pakistan is haunted by the lack of a coherent political theology, denoting a situation where nothing is sacred other than raw power. In other words, Pakistan is a profane state, where the rule "might is right" prevails for gangster regimes that are cruel and inherently opportunist.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Counter-Revolutionary Machine**

Any politics originating from the masses remains the primary target for state cruelty. Both the colonial and the post-colonial states saw popular dissent as dangerous and with potential revolutionary consequences. For example, in the infamous Meerut Conspiracy Case in 1929, the colonial regime decided to not only ban the Communist Party of India, but also to condemn leadership of the Communist Party to life sentences for carrying books authored by Lenin and Marx. Colonial authorities believed that if the larger public encountered these dangerous ideas, they could spread "like the plague" to overthrow Empire.

Similarly, the Pakistani state deemed the Communist movement and democratic forces as mortal threats to its ruling logic. For this reason, the Communist Party of Pakistan was banned in 1954, merely 6 years after

coming into existence for its “anti-state” character, a charge that has since been levelled against a number of political entities. The ferocity of a crackdown is even more dramatic when targeting the working class. The killing of 72 workers at Landhi (Karachi) for protesting for labour rights in 1972, the use of anti-terror legislation against striking textile workers in Faisalabad in 2010, and the use of tear gas and bulldozers to demolish slums in Islamabad in 2015 are just a few examples of the excessive and spectacular forms of violence used by the state to arrest the “contagion of rebellion” overtaking the popular masses.<sup>[7]</sup>

As demonstrated, the aim of such pre-emptive forms of violence was not to punish the particular crime but to induce sufficient fear to prevent the escalation of popular agitation. The state views itself as a counter-force to the revolutionary potential of the masses, a defence mechanism that acts pre-emptively not only to control the past but also to tame the future. In general, a revolution is often followed by a counter-revolution by remnants of the former regime. In the case of Pakistan, the temporal sequence is reversed; a counter-revolution seeks to annihilate the very possibility of emancipatory and transformative politics prior to a revolution.

The permanent State of Emergency is a tool in the hands of this counter-revolutionary force imposing its will upon the public. It is crucial to note that counter-revolutionary violence exercised by the state is a “conservative” form of violence that aims to restore the balance of forces in favour of the prevailing order. The terror and chaos unleashed by “exceptional measures” is merely an attempt to avoid a genuine critique of the system, and thus infinitely postpone its transformation. The counter-revolution aims to preserve a murderous *status quo*, ensuring that nothing truly changes, and that excessive violence is used for maintaining an unstable and punishing system.

In such political and legal uncertainty, violence backed by the coercive apparatus becomes the primary method of legitimising the state, a circular logic in which the demonstration of power justifies power. The rule of law is replaced by the rule of fear in which citizens themselves are deemed as enemies. This authoritarian and violent characteristic is facilitated by the constant real or perceived threat of war that threatens to overwhelm the territorial integrity of the country. Pakistan’s tense relations with India have

provided fodder to this sense of insecurity which the ruling classes use to further their control over society.

The perpetual threat of war even in “peace times” allows both the Indian and Pakistani governments to control internal dissent by labeling political opponents as enemy agents, removing them from the national political community and opening them to state violence. Moreover, the two states deploy this fear to extract a large amount of resources for the military, strengthening the coercive apparatuses of the state vis-a-vis other institutions. The result is an increasing militarisation of the subcontinent, further fuelling the paradoxical mix of heightened securitisation in the midst of pervasive insecurity. Akin to how the priest and the devil end up realising their interdependence in Khalil Jibran’s “Satan”, the elites of these neighbouring countries know that their ostensible hatred for each other is what mutually sustains their power.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **Rentier State**

Pakistan’s militarisation is hastened by its specific entanglement with imperialism. Under the British Raj, Punjab and the NWFP were central recruiting grounds for imperial wars. Soldiers from these regions were not only used as frontline fighters in both the First and the Second World Wars, but also served empire in disparate places including Hong Kong, Singapore and Kenya. Since Independence, our postcolonial elites made a strategic choice to align themselves with the US-led camp in the emerging Cold War against the Soviet Union. The signing of SEATO and CENTO defence pacts that made Pakistan America’s “most allied ally” were an indication that the new state was eager to inherit the anti-communist colonial legacy.<sup>[9]</sup>

Pakistan’s emergence as a frontline state in America’s fight against the Soviet Union had serious consequences for the country’s political trajectory. First, it firmly inserted Pakistan into the geostrategic calculations of a super power, making our country a footnote in a story it neither controlled nor authored. Pakistan had to adjust to the changing whims of the US elite as it charted out its battles in the region, acting as a rentier state whose only leverage on the global stage was to convince its masters that it could effectively do its bidding. Indeed, a state that rents out its geostrategic location to foreign powers can only have an ironic, if not a hypocritical, relation to the idea of national sovereignty.

Consider the case of the monstrous right-wing dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq. Zia came to power in a military coup against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977, eventually hanging the former prime minister on what was widely viewed as a trumped-up murder charge. Zia promised privatisation, banned trade unions and student unions to “discipline” the population, and initiated an overt Islamisation process of society. However, his government received its true *raison d’etre* after the US decided to engage Pakistan in its covert war against the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan. The Zia regime allied itself with the right-wing Reagan and Thatcher governments in their fight for the “free world” against the threat of Soviet communism. It mattered little that the military regime, the frontline warrior in this supposed fight for freedom, not only banned all political parties and suspended democratic rights, but also introduced public floggings for journalists, a spectacle that would have made General Dyer proud.

Thus began the bizarre entanglement of Western governments, dictatorships in the Muslim world and “jihadis” from Afghanistan and elsewhere to fight the infidel regime in Kabul. Zia’s regime made Pakistan a launch pad for the insurgency in Afghanistan, building a dense network of jihadi camps from the money he received from his American patrons. As is always the case, the poor, disposable sections of the population were recruited to fight in America’s war.

Eventually, the Soviets were defeated and had to retreat from Afghanistan. The post-war scenario was aptly captured in the last scene of *Charlie Wilson’s War*, a Hollywood movie on the Democratic Congressman who was the key architect of the Afghan war. Wilson is shown making a case in the US Congress to pass a bill allowing funds for rebuilding schools in war-torn Afghanistan. All his colleagues appear disinterested in his proposal, stating that they are more busy “rearranging” Eastern Europe for the post-Cold War world. An exasperated Charlie Wilson reminds them how America always leaves after pursuing its “ideals” abroad, “but the ball keeps rolling” in the war-ravaged countries. “No one gives a shit about schools in Pakistan” retorts a senior colleague before Wilson points out that he has been talking about Afghanistan, leading to an awkward silence in the room.

This was true. No one gave a shit about Pakistan (or Afghanistan), as the region was left with the debris of imperial wars and religious

fundamentalism while the US moved on to other matters of urgent concern. Internationally isolated and financially in crisis, Pakistan became a hotbed for militant groups in the 1990s that continued seeking Muslim lands to liberate, while Afghanistan was over-run by warlords and later fell under the terrifying regime of the Taliban. This infrastructure of militancy continued to thrive under state-patronage until the 9/11 attacks in New York, a tragedy whose roots lay in America's funding for the anti-Soviet Jihad in the 1980s.

When George W. Bush demanded Pakistan's cooperation in Afghanistan for the "War on Terror", Pakistan's military dictator, General Musharraf, readily complied. The decision to push Pakistan into another regional conflict at the behest of an imperial power was taken without much public debate as Musharraf had dissolved the parliament. The decision once again highlighted the mercenary nature of the state, ready to lease out its land, its people and military for imperial wars, all in return for an artificial financial boom. Musharraf did not even hide the moral bankruptcy of his decision. Under the guise of his "Pakistan First" slogan, he bluntly stated that if Pakistan did not support America's war, the country would be militarily and financially squeezed. Overnight, Pakistan transformed from being the "Fort of Islam" into a frontline state against Jihadi forces.

### **Permanent War**

The kids from poor families who were earlier told that they embodied the will of God were now declared terrorists, highlighting the disposability of life within the calculus of a rentier state. As the conflict in Afghanistan intensified, it entered Pakistan's borders with the advent of heavily armed members of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Their presence prompted military operations in large parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, displacing entire populations in the process. The country also became a testing ground for Obama's illegal and covert drone strike programme, another feather in the cap for the country's elites in service of imperialism.

More disturbingly, the endless "War on Terror" fuelled an entire infrastructure of war, surveillance and extra-legal violence far beyond the fight against Islamist militancy. In 2006, the Pakistani state went to war against Baloch nationalists and instituted the horrendous policy of enforced disappearances against both Islamist and ethnic groups. Anti-terror laws

were extended to target leaders of farmers, workers and housing rights movements, demonstrating the intersection of the War on Terror with counter-revolutionary violence.

The continuing conflict has resulted in suicide attacks across the country leading to the death of over seventy thousand Pakistanis, including many soldiers and officers. Yet, no coherent state narrative to support this mammoth war exists to this day in Pakistan. The result is not only widespread allegations that Pakistan continues to harbor terrorists as a strategic lever in its foreign policy, but also the acceleration of a profound ideological disorientation.<sup>[10]</sup>

An example is the recent interview by Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi in which he was asked about Prime Minister Imran Khan's "slip of tongue" in which he labelled Osama bin Laden a "martyr". A visibly uncomfortable Qureshi tried evading the question before he was pressed on whether he himself believed bin Laden was a martyr or a terrorist, to which the foreign minister responded "I shall pass on that one".

His incredible refusal to answer the question was symptomatic of the ideology, or the lack thereof, of a rentier state. This was the representative of a country that became a front-line state in the fight against Al-Qaeda and provided key logistics against the terrorist group. Yet, he could not even nominate the enemy, revealing how Pakistan fought a bloody war more like a paid mercenary rather than an honorable nation-state. Beneath the bravado and ideological mystification invoked through religion and patriotism, the only permanent loyalty is to the financial flows from abroad, irrespective of the dire consequences for the people, law and national dignity.

The entanglement of counter-revolutionary violence, the absence of a political theology and the endless addiction to imperial wars have produced Pakistan's permanent state of emergency, with all its chaos and cruelty. The result is a pervasive culture of repression that shapes various facets of Pakistan, including in the police, bureaucracy, judiciary, political parties and even aspects of civil society. The institution that brings together these various dimensions of violence is the military, which acts as the hegemonic cement for the country's ruling order. The military leadership retains the ability to suspend the Constitution, overthrow governments, nominate patriots and enemies among the populace, launch military operations

against internal enemies and negotiate rents with imperial powers. It is the institution in which the whims and violence of the ruling classes coalesce, making it the enforcer and protector of the state of fear we live under.

In sum, the first thesis on Pakistan's political authoritarianism follows:

*As an inheritor of the colonial legacy, Pakistan is governed through a permanent state of emergency, where the whims of the ruling classes supersede adherence to law. The emergency is accentuated by the counter-revolutionary disposition of the ruling elites who exercise pre-emptive violence against opponents to eliminate potential alternatives to the status quo. Pakistan's endless entanglement with imperialist wars further undermines the possibility of a stable legal and political configuration. The result is that the country is devoid of a coherent political theology, while Islam and patriotism simply mask a deep and disorienting vacuity. This violent and arbitrary system is overseen and managed by the military leadership, the status quo's most powerful and loyal guardian.*

## CONTROLLED DEMOCRACY

*Time has come to end the political role of intelligence agencies in Pakistan.*

*They have ruined the country by manufacturing puppets. Agencies only promote those individuals it can control. They want controlled politicians, controlled judges, and controlled bureaucrats. They manipulate elections to install puppets. A country cannot function like this.*

Imran Khan, 2007

On April 10, 1988, Rawalpindi was a battleground with missile rockets flying aimlessly across the densely populated city. The terrifying scene was a reaction to an explosion in Ojhri Camp, a weapons storage centre run by the military. The site held weapons provided to Pakistan by the Central Intelligence Agency in its covert war against the Soviet-backed Afghan government. The incident occurred in the midst of negotiations for Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan as well as discussions to form a new government. At least 93 people were killed, while over a thousand were injured in the post-explosion mayhem in Rawalpindi.

While the official position was that the blast was an accident, rumors began circulating immediately after the terrifying incident. Some believed that the Soviet Union was behind the attack as a last gesture of revenge before its humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan. Others believed the CIA orchestrated the attack to limit the availability of weapons to Pakistan as it no longer wanted an escalation of the conflict in Afghanistan. Finally, there were many who believed that the Pakistani military leadership was involved in the tragic incident to cover up its involvement in the illegal sale of these weapons before an important weapons inspection that threatened to expose the illicit trade.



While the country was plunged into shock and despair, it was widely believed that the issue would never be investigated since it involved both local and international secret agencies, some of the most powerful and unaccountable institutions in the world. However, the sudden decision of Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo to launch an unprecedented inquiry into what were deemed “military matters” came as a pleasant surprise to many. What made Junejo’s decision more daring was the fact that he was handpicked by military generals to give constitutional cover to their dictatorial rule. Hailing from a feudal background, Junejo was known as a loyalist of military dictatorships while he lacked popular appeal in the country.

General Zia chose Junejo to lead the Parliament when he held the first general elections in 1985 following 8 years of martial law. Zia made two key decisions to ensure that Parliament would remain a rubber stamp for his private interests. First, he disallowed political parties from contesting in the elections, ensuring that the popular opposition parties were not able to mount a coherent challenge to his rule nor disrupt his plans to handpick the new government. Second, he made an amendment in the constitution giving the President (Zia himself) the right to dissolve the parliament, a warning for lawmakers not to deviate from military authored scripts.

Junejo, however, consistently pushed the limits of what the generals expected of him. In April 1986, he allowed opposition leader Benazir Bhutto to return to the country, invited opposition leaders to a multi-party conference and made appointments to the military against the wishes of the top brass. Most importantly, he facilitated the Geneva Accord, a pact that led to Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was vociferously opposed by General Zia. In other words, Junejo violated the unwritten rules of Pakistani politics by taking his constitutional role as head of government seriously. As a result, Zia dismissed the Junejo government and dissolved the parliament on May 28, 1988, reminding the public that the “General Will” of the people will remain subordinate to the “General’s whims”.

### **Puppets and Puppeteers**

This episode highlights one of the glaring contradictions of Pakistan’s political system. On paper, the country aspires to be a parliamentary democracy with the prime minister as the chief executive. However, in

practice, it is widely acknowledged that the centre of power lies neither in the legislative assemblies nor in the prime minister's office but in the General Head Quarters (GHQ) of Pakistan's military. Part of the informal rule of participating in the political system is to never publicly acknowledge the impotence of the parliament but allowing it to be deduced from practice. For example, neither issues of internal security nor the military budget can be discussed on the floor of the House. Similarly, issues such as enforced disappearances or rampant censorship of the media are considered too "sensitive" to be discussed by the country's elected legislators, leaving key decisions outside the purview of public debate.

The political theatre is therefore constrained by multiple taboos that hover over and above the legal framework of power, prompting secrecy and suspicion in political affairs. In order to achieve the precarious balance between a permanent state of emergency and constitutionalism, a script must be followed in which taboo questions are never to be asked. The authors of the script keep a close guard on each actor to ensure that no one disrupts the carefully crafted political show. Put simply, everyone knows the reality but cynically pretends to be naive, creating an ironic regime where the seat of government and site of governance are never the same.

In other words, Pakistan's polity is characterised by a constitutionally sanctioned authoritarianism. The constitutional framework provides a façade for the permanent emergency, generating a dialectic between the visible and invisible, the appearance and the essence, the benign and the cruel. The system keeps rotating characters without ever challenging the fundamental architecture of underlying power. It also holds a specific relation between form and content. In form, countries such as Pakistan mimic enlightenment ideas of representation, including republicanism, constitutionalism and human rights. Yet in practice these ideals only enter the public domain in tightly controlled rituals that veil the permanent state of emergency in the country, creating a gap between the semantics and the pragmatics of ruling Pakistan. This gap often proves to be the riveting tension between pro-democratic and anti-democratic forces in the country.

This model of scripted democracy was developed by the British state that handed over large landholdings to its favoured families, granting them political hegemony in their areas in return for perpetual loyalty to the Raj. These families became increasingly important when limited elections were

introduced in the subcontinent, as they could use their economic hegemony in order to win in their constituencies, giving birth to the concept of political electables that continues to influence Pakistan's politics even to this day. The unwritten rule of this electoral exercise was that while politicians could canvass, win elections and form provincial governments, they could not challenge the viceroy or question British rule in India, ensuring that the democratic will was always subordinate to the logic of colonial rule. Those who rebelled saw their privileges plummeting and, in many cases, became targets of political victimisation from the colonial state.

Pakistan has inherited the colonial legacy of “vice-regal democracy” by ensuring that political families stay within the frameworks provided by an unaccountable military establishment. Political leaders are allowed to become important stakeholders in their own localities and enhance their financial power through state patronage. However, it is expected that they would not challenge the unwritten sovereignty of the military rulers in key decisions on foreign policy and internal security. For a security state addicted to proxy wars, these two domains constitute the core of its politics, a space from which elected officials are barred.

The goal of creating compliant and docile governments has led to one of the most unique features of Pakistan's political history: the use of political puppets. The puppet has the role of being the “democratic” face of the establishment — ostensibly the elected leader but whose strings are pulled elsewhere. This entire process is a delicate business that requires identifying potential candidates to be cultivated into “leaders”. Usually, they happen to be young, ambitious individuals from families connected to powerful circles in Islamabad (or Washington), and are docile enough to parrot the narrative of the deep state.<sup>[11]</sup> A crucial criterion is that these individuals not be grassroots activists or popular among the people, lest they begin representing the aspirations of marginalised sections of society. This is why Pakistan has had nineteen prime ministers over the past seventy-four years, but a majority of the public is unable to recognise even half of them. From the perspective of Pakistan's military establishment, obscurity enhances the credentials of these candidates.

The process entails cultivating these individuals into understanding the taboos, red lines, unwritten rules and informal matrix of power essential for the performance of their potential role as “leaders”. Often, this training occurs through inducting these individuals into the cabinets of military dictators, where they can be groomed to respect the true epicentres of power, with both the material gains and moral decline such self-debasement entails. Some examples include Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as Foreign Minister in General Ayub Khan’s government, Muhammad Junejo as Railway Minister in General Zia ul Haq’s government, Nawaz Sharif as Punjab’s Chief Minister under Zia and Shaukat Aziz as General Musharraf’s Finance Minister — all of whom later became prime ministers of civilian governments in Pakistan, blurring the line between the origins of democracy and dictatorship in Pakistan.

### **Accountability as Technique of Governance**

Since we inherited the parliamentary system, the ascent of invented leaders also demands the manufacturing of political parties that can propel these individuals to power. This necessity gave rise to the concept of the “King’s Party”, a party dedicated to the permanent emergency and the entrenched power structure. If parties are supposed to mobilise the public, the king’s parties should be deemed as non-parties, since they exist to remind the masses that their will is meaningless and that key decisions about their destiny are made elsewhere. Engineering loyal political entities is the most complex exercise of governance in Pakistan, requiring an elaborate economy of threats and rewards to cobble together a compliant political coalition.<sup>[12]</sup>

The institutions responsible for enforcing and managing this task are the powerful intelligence agencies of Pakistan. While the military is the guardian of the permanent emergency, intelligence agencies are the invisible bureaucracy ensuring its public management, carrying out the task of preparing data on “winnable candidates”, identifying their vulnerabilities and using state and non-state actors to secure their loyalty. One of the most widely used terms for disciplining political actors is “accountability”, a term used by all dictators to justify their governments while instituting a whimsical system of punishment and rewards to prolong their rule.

Accountability in Pakistan operates within the context of crony capitalism in which the richest families accumulate wealth through state patronage and shady deals. The nature of capitalism in contemporary Pakistan is such that elites continue to operate beyond the legal framework. [13] Whether the land mafia illegally dispossessing the poor from land, factory owners violating labour and environmental laws, corporations and landed elites evading taxes and loans, or businessmen signing shady deals with local and global contractors, all major financial ventures require the blessing of the state apparatus to evade accountability under the law.

Since political actors are major stakeholders in the economy, their obvious vulnerability is the enforcement of law itself. This is why a large number of “electables”, i.e., political families who traditionally maintain hegemony in their constituencies, gravitate towards the King’s Party, lest their financial or political control be threatened by falling out of favour with the state machinery. However, sections of the elite reticent in switching loyalties are then subjected to the ruthlessness of the “rule of law”. Recognising the fact that everyone is technically guilty if laws were to be applied, the intelligence apparatus comes into action as the selective enforcer of law to coerce political actors into submission.

A good example of this practice is the National Accountability Bureau, which has been the instrument for political blackmail of politicians exerted by the deep state since the Musharraf era (1999-2008). After overthrowing Nawaz Sharif’s government in a military coup on a number of charges, including rampant corruption, Musharraf aimed to create his own version of the King’s Party, which he called the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q). Interestingly, the PML-Q was headed by former leaders of Nawaz Sharif’s party (PML-N), who had “seen the light” after Sharif’s government was dismissed. Many individuals were arrested and charged with corruption only to be later exonerated upon joining the PML-Q. One such individual was Mushahid Hussain, Sharif’s Information Minister from 1997 to 1999. After serving a year in prison, he defected to the Musharraf regime, eventually becoming a Senator and the General Secretary of PML-Q.

In another case of politically expedient mercy, 10 MNAs from Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), a party erstwhile declared a national security threat, defected to the regime as a forward bloc and were rewarded with key

federal ministries, including ministries of defence and interior (2002). The group called itself the Pakistan People's Party "Patriots", denoting the possibility of transitioning from treasonous to patriotic if willing to sell-out on principles.

The crowning moment came when the US-brokered negotiations between the Musharraf regime and Benazir Bhutto, the leader of the main opposition party, the PPP, resulted in the "National Reconciliation Ordinance". After justifying his dictatorship for eight years in the name of accountability and anti-corruption, Musharraf ended all corruption cases against political opponents as a desperate attempt to shore up his crumbling regime. The farce was laid bare for the world to see — entanglement between accountability and impunity was extended or withdrawn to different actors as part of a political calculus. This implies that rather than attempting to eradicate corruption, accountability in Pakistan is a technique of governance. It is a method through which threats, selective action and conditional pardons are put into effect. As a result, the anti-corruption drives have not only fuelled financial corruption, but have also led to severe moral decline in Pakistani politics, rewarding deceit and hypocrisy over principles.

Such measures of accountability never extend to the country's entrenched security apparatus, which must remain above and beyond the rules and regulations prescribed to mortals. By focusing public rage solely against the country's civilian leadership, the accountability process serves as a weapon of mass distraction, foreclosing serious discussion regarding the permanent power structure that controls the fate of the country. In other words, "fighting corruption" is part of the ruling ideology in Pakistan through which the establishment entrenches its privileges without creating a meaningful culture of accountability, economic transparency or political participation.

### **Managed Elections**

As this entire drama is created to give the semblance of democracy, the next step is to manage the general elections by targeting, disqualifying or maligning political leaders that contest pre-determined results. Since 2002, for instance, leaders of major parties have been barred from contesting in every election except 2013 due to manufactured legal hurdles.

Moreover, smaller parties are cajoled into an alliance with the King's Party to facilitate their ascent to power. An example was the formation of the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad in the 1990 elections, a coalition of right-wing parties cobbled together by the intelligence agencies against the PPP. Military officers funneled taxpayer money to candidates of IJI through Mehran Bank to propel their campaigns in what became known as the "Mehrangate" scandal. In 1994, veteran politician Asghar Khan filed a petition in the Supreme Court to dig out facts of the case. 18 years later, on March 7, 2012, the former Chief of the Mehran Bank, Younis Habib, admitted that he had been ordered by military and intelligence officer to channel money to the IJI in order to defeat the PPP. No individual was ever convicted for this colossal manipulation of public finances and the electoral process.

Eventually, this hectic exercise leads to the "victory" of the King's Party on election day, ensuring the entrenchment of the militarised *status quo* while maintaining the façade of democratic transition. Despite knowing the truth of this process, political pundits are expected to congratulate the nation on another "successful democratic exercise". Such instances of overt management of democratic outcomes are becoming common in authoritarian governments including Turkey, Cambodia and Russia. This process of politically engineered democracy, however, has been mastered in Pakistan for decades, one of the country's most important but underappreciated contributions to modern political theory.

Of course, there are always characters like the child from Christen Anderson's "Emperor's New Clothes" who shout "the Emperor is naked!" Such naïve souls are threatened, tortured and on many occasions, even killed. The hundreds of PPP workers who were tortured in Zia's dungeons in the 1980s, the political workers in East Pakistan, Balochistan and other peripheries who were eliminated for daring to say no, or the countless journalists who routinely lose their jobs for exposing electoral rigging are examples of the repercussions in store for disobedient subjects.

One of the most glaring examples of coercion against dissidents is the case of Mudassar Naaru, a Punjabi poet and journalist who vehemently opposed blatant rigging in the 2018 elections. In August 2018, Mudassar Naaru went missing, leaving behind his wife and 1-year-old son. The family has been campaigning for Mudassar's return for the past 3 years. In May

2021, Naaru's wife, Sadaf, passed away due to a heart attack, leaving their son Sachal without either of his parents. Mudassar Naaru remains missing to this day.

### **Reign of Puppets**

The combination of threats, rewards and outright cruelty results in the ascension of the puppet to the throne. A puppet is the *de jure* head of government, but he knows he is indebted to the puppeteers and not to the public. As the face of the democratic façade, the puppet must maintain silence on key issues while also bearing responsibility for policy failures, like a sandbag for his masters.

The current government led by Imran Khan is the latest invention of the country's security establishment. Khan has benefitted from the classic tactics of political engineering. In the lead up to the 2018 elections, his political opponents were vilified and arrested, critics in the media were silenced, while some of the most widely despised characters were pushed to join his coalition. Not only did his party welcome the usual suspects who have remained permanent features of King's Parties, but a number of legislators from PPP and PML-Q facing corruption charges also switched sides to become partners in Khan's "anti-corruption drive". Such blatant disregard for public image led critics to declare Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) Party a "laundry machine", where formerly corrupt officials could enter to wash away their sins!

What makes Khan's decision to become a puppet for GHQ tragic is his public and unequivocal expression of disgust in the past for those who did the military's bidding. In both local and global forums, he accused the military of rigging elections, launching brutal military operations, selling the country's sovereignty to the Americans and even abducting political opponents.<sup>[14]</sup> Over the past decade, however, Khan made a Faustian bargain with the devil, muting his criticism of the military, and allowing corrupt actors into the party while using the familiar tropes of accountability, treason and blasphemy against political opponents.

Since coming to power, Khan has overseen an increase in the monstrous violations of human rights in the country, while censoring criticism of institutions he previously loved to rail against. Senior journalists such as Matiullah Jan and Rizwan Razi were abducted in broad daylight, student



leaders have been repeatedly arrested, and the sedition law is used widely against critics ranging from civil society activists, professors and parliamentarians, including Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir, the latter of whom is still languishing in prison. Such instances are completely contrary to the claims Khan made during his long journey in the opposition, earning him the name “U-Turn Khan”. For a man who fancied himself as a defiant reformer, it is remarkable how quickly he has adjusted to being a footnote in someone else’s story, embodying abject surrender against the establishment.

### **The Script Disrupted**

This hybrid system, however, is never fully able to reconcile the contradictions that perpetually haunt it. While everyone knows their role in this drama, there are often moments in which characters go off-script against the wishes of the authors. In other words, political actors, owing to increasing popularity or fundamental conflicts with the security apparatus, sometimes begin asserting their own will. This is precisely what happened when Junejo ordered an inquiry into the Ojhri Camp incident, when Nawaz Sharif pursued a policy of peace with India, and when Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto tried to break the military’s monopoly over domestic politics.

These instances are a reminder that the system can function smoothly for power brokers unless a leader begins to take their mandate seriously; i.e., if the prime minister feels he/she really is the chief executive, if parliament starts asserting itself as the supreme institution or the if media truly starts acting independently, the whole political theatre is threatened by imminent collapse. The reason is that the system is built on the disavowal of constitutional power, which is merely a mask for the entrenched authoritarianism. The insistence on following the law acts as a disruption in the script, which has to be tamed.

Take the recent case in which Nawaz Sharif decided to improve ties with India and his grip on power increased (2013-2017), posing a challenge to the establishment’s hold over democracy. The rhetoric of accountability was used in the media to undermine the government, while the judiciary was used to disqualify Sharif in 2017, demonstrating that the deep state could control key institutions even if its power was slipping in Pakistan’s Parliament. Moreover, religious fanatics were used as proxies to weaken his

party's government during Tehreek-e-Labbaik's infamous *dharna* (sit-in) in November 2017. The religious party choked the main highways of the capital Islamabad, demanding the government resign for allegedly removing fidelity to Prophethood from the oath of allegiance taken by legislators.

As clashes intensified between police and the protestors, the military leadership stepped in, calling for a "truce" between the two sides. The government was thereby forced into a humiliating capitulation. Over the following days, viral videos emerged of senior military officials handing 1000-rupee cheques to each protestor, demonstrating the covert support for the movement from the security apparatus.

While Sharif was facing such attacks on multiple fronts, he was barred from appearing on television to defend his point of view and was later arrested. He currently lives in exile in London.

When the system cannot be managed through "legal" means, there is of course the option of taking off the mask completely to stage a coup. This is what happened when the military overthrew Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977, charging him in a frivolous murder case and eventually hanging him on April 4, 1979. Similar military coups in 1958 and 1999 also point to moments of crisis in which the repressed truth of the system is forced to reveal its unaltered power, a situation described by Walter Benjamin as akin to the "manifestation of Gods". In a more dramatic fashion, the "wrong decision" made by the people of what is today known as Bangladesh in the election of 1970 led to a full-scale military operation, a decision for which hundreds of thousands of Bengalis paid with their blood. It showed that the ruling elite would be ready to wage war to the point of losing more than half of the country rather than accepting the norms of democracy.

The theory of separation of powers does not work in countries such as Pakistan where the security apparatus remains the unaccountable sovereign in key decision-making despite the constitutional veil. Furthermore, periodic tension between invented leaders and their masters creates contradictions in the system but also condemns society to a cyclical consciousness — an obsessive repetition in which political leaders break from the establishment either to be completely discarded or wait to be re-selected under more favourable conditions, foreclosing the possibility of a genuine rupture from the system.

Perhaps the reason it is easy for the establishment to arrest any serious challenge to its authority is because the struggle for democracy increasingly appears to be an intra-elite battle leaving the common public as mere spectators. If the class base of the democratic parties mostly comprises oligarchs dependent on the state for patronage, they are at threat of abandonment by the state, thus dictating their loyalty to the King's Party in order to safeguard their property. Therefore, despite its importance, procedural democracy has never enthused the general public beyond certain democratic-minded intellectuals.

In conclusion, the following thesis sums up the relationship between democracy and dictatorship in Pakistan:

*Pakistan's intelligence apparatus is an invisible bureaucracy that ensures perpetual servitude of civilian governments to the whims of the security apparatus. It engages in political engineering by using the threat of accountability to cobble together loyal political parties led by puppets who are assured of victory through the staging of managed elections. If certain civilian actors go off script by invoking their constitutional power, the system falls into crisis, prompting the military to tear away the mask of legality and reveal itself as an unaccountable sovereign. The process ensures that despite momentary disruptions, the fundamental architecture of power successfully sustains itself.*

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## CLASS WAR

*There is no written contract and the only proof of employment is a card. The factory management marks the attendance of the workers themselves and signs everybody out after nine hours so that if the record is ever inspected, it would appear that the management is complying with the law. In truth, we work longer hours and there is not even sick leave. Salary is deducted if someone is unwell even for a day. There is no maternity leave. Any woman who becomes visibly pregnant is told to leave.*

A woman worker in Lahore<sup>[15]</sup>

On March 20, 2021, there was a pervasive sense of fear in Chungi Amar Sadhu as an unidentified body was recovered from the open sewer that runs through the neighbourhood. The corpse had been there for 3 days and was only discovered accidentally when bystanders helped a rickshaw driver who fell into the same drain. After trying to identify the body for a number of days, authorities disposed of the body, marking it “unclaimed”. The incident hardly received mention in the national press, nor did any state officials visit the site where the tragedy occurred.

Chungi Amar Sadhu, a dense working-class neighbourhood in Lahore, is adjacent to the elite “Pak Arab” neighbourhood and is only about 5 miles away from the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), the military-run housing society considered the poshest area in the city. The physical distance between these spaces might be minimal, yet they represent different worlds. DHA neighbourhoods aspire to be more akin to suburbs of the West: clean roads, ornamental gardens, retail stores carrying imported items, elite schools, colleges and hospitals and privatised, clean water. These are spaces packed with wealth, social connections and access to the world beyond Pakistan, exemplifying the power of the country’s bourgeoisie.

A place like Chungi Amar Sadhu, on the other hand, is symptomatic of the neglect and decay of the masses in our cities. At the confluence of three industrial areas (Gajju Matah, Kot Lakhpat and Thokar Niaz Baig), it not only holds the reserve army of labour for the adjoining factories, but is also the repository for industrial waste that continues to be dumped into drinking water. The result is the widespread occurrence of diseases such as typhoid, hepatitis as well as malaria, reflecting the terrifying figure provided by World Health Organization that showed 40 percent of deaths in Pakistan occur due to waterborne diseases. The neighbourhood lacks decent schools, housing or roads, and many residents cannot afford to see a doctor even once a year.<sup>[16]</sup>

Water is not the only killer. Since the last playground in the neighbourhood was engulfed by an elite housing society that later barred working-class people from using it, children of the neighbourhood play in streets lined with open sewers and broken electrical wires. A few months ago, a mother lost two of her children who were electrocuted as they played in the streets, an incident that triggered protests in the area but without any compensation for the affected family. Death is an integral part of the neighbourhood's material infrastructure, its occurrence marked by cruel indifference from the city's managers.

We are living in a spatial apartheid premised upon class difference. If the posh neighbourhoods embody power and abundance, working-class neighbourhoods increasingly epitomise neglect, abandonment and the disposability of human life. The two worlds are becoming mutually unintelligible for young residents on either side of the divide. Consider the fact that parents in elite societies are paying Rs. 50,000 per month as school fees for children as young as 4. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed the closure of a number of schools in working-class neighbourhoods because parents could no longer afford to pay Rs. 500 per child in school fees. The two worlds are drifting apart, with all the disastrous consequences this bears for social cohesion.

The primary method of separating the two worlds is through violence. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British set up armed barriers between officer colonies/cantonments and the rest of society, ensuring separation between natives and the colonial elites. Today, this logic is visible through the

private security guards who “screen” every individual entering these elite spaces, inscribing militarisation onto space. Considering the social, economic and political insularity of the Pakistani elites, it would be fair to say that they are heading the most successful “separatist movement” in the country, a movement that seeks to insulate itself from the squalor and abandonment reflected in the experience of millions of Pakistanis.

The growing gulf in society not only poses a challenge for social stability, but also undermines the possibility of democracy. Marxist theorists have long argued that political development is shaped by the economic relations that exist in society. If the everyday experience of the poorest is akin to neglect and abandonment, it is difficult to imagine a democratic culture taking root within the national psyche. Even Jacques Rousseau, one of the intellectual architects of modern democracy, was clear that the democratic system would be impossible to implement if there was widespread inequality among inhabitants of a polity. In other words, militarisation is the logical outcome of a society where the primary language of communication between the masses and the elites is one of dehumanising forms of violence.

### **Manufacturing Inequality**

There are two aspects that we can explore to understand the nature of the country’s political economy making it prone to authoritarianism while condemning its people to a life of misery and indignity. First, the system privileges the country’s economic elites, who receive incredible forms of state patronage, while imposing the costs of their failed policies onto the public. Second, this “socialism for the rich” is supplemented by the country’s incorporation into the global imperialist system in which it plays out the role of a rentier state, pushing the country’s economy into the grip of international financial institutions through debt. These two dynamics combine not only to push the masses into a vortex of poverty and indignity, but also remain major obstacles to any democratic transition in the political sphere.

Consider the shocking details published in a report on inequality compiled by the United Nations Development Program in 2020. It showed the stark inequality that shapes the Pakistan economy as elites continue to give themselves tax breaks and a host of other economic privileges. For

example, the report showed how 1 percent of feudal families own more than 22 percent of farmland today in Pakistan, with the richest 0.2 percent holding over 400 acres each. Since the feudal classes control political parties, they are over-represented in Parliament, giving themselves massive tax breaks on income and land revenue, as well as subsidies on water, electricity and fertilisers, resulting in a total “gift” of Rs. 370 billion from the government annually. Similar “incentives” are provided to other sectors such as the corporate sector (Rs. 724 billion), traders (Rs. 348 billion), and “high net-worth individuals (Rs. 386 billion), resulting in total benefits worth Rs. 2.66 trillion for the country’s elites annually. To put things into perspective, this is four times higher than the money spent for social protection for the most marginalised sections of society, indicating the transfer of wealth from the public to the super rich.<sup>[17]</sup>

On the other hand, misery continues to intensify for ordinary citizens. Today, 3.8 million people in Pakistan are facing acute food insecurity, while 40 percent of children have stunted growth and 50 percent are anemic due to malnutrition. The astonishing neglect of the nation’s children is symptomatic of the deepening financial stress faced by working-class families. A recent report by the Mahbub ul Haq Research Centre shows that unemployment rose by 34 percent, while mean income fell by a massive 42 percent since the first COVID-19 lockdown. By November 2020, three million workers still had not regained employment, whereas the average income dropped 5.5 percent below its pre-lockdown level. Since 2018, wages have dropped across various sectors, by 0.92 percent to 8.2 percent.<sup>[18]</sup> During the same period, inflation hovered around 10 percent, putting greater constraints on wage-earners as well as on the increasing army of unemployed people. Despite excessive prosperity of the elites, a large number of people are being forced to live between stagnant wages and wage-less life.

How power works in the economic realm is evident. For instance, in the textile industry COVID-19-induced lockdowns led corporate tycoons to discard their workforce to minimise their losses. I remember how palpable the sense of desperation was when we began distributing food rations as part of Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement’s labour relief campaign. We met workers from Nishat Textiles whose employment cards had been disabled

so they could not enter the factory gates. The management at Nishat claimed that it no longer had funds to keep paying workers, many of whom who had worked for the company for decades. To put this cruelty into perspective, one should remember that the owner of Nishat, Mian Mansha, is the richest man in Pakistan holds a net worth of \$3.7 billion.

Hunger and riots appeared a palpable reality, forcing the government to finally announce a “relief package” for the poor. Beyond making direct transfers to the poorest sections of society (at barely subsistence level for just a few months), the government provided funds from the State Bank of Pakistan to major businesses in order to prevent them from firing workers. Most companies availed this benefit, but it did not stop them from firing the “excess” workforce. Indeed, the crisis provided a wonderful opportunity to restructure labour relations and ensure the further entrenchment of the corporate elite.

One such business group was Ibrahim Fibres Limited, one of the most powerful textile companies in Pakistan. Based in Shah Kot near Faisalabad, the factory employed 4000 workers, half of whom were full-time workers with benefits. In April 2020, barely a month after the country’s first lockdown, the company decided to fire its 2000 full-time workers and offered to rehire them as part-time workers with lower wages. The workers erupted into protests, as many had spent years working at the plant and felt betrayed by the abrupt decision of the company management.

In July 2020, we visited Saleem Masih’s house, a janitor for the company who was fired along with other workers. Saleem’s daughter was scheduled to marry in January 2021. Without a running income, he was becoming indebted and barely making ends meet. Eventually, he was forced to pull his 14-year-old son out of high school to send him to work as a daily-wager in the construction industry. For 6 months, the father and son desperately tried to accumulate enough resources for the wedding, but considering the economic downturn, they never managed to secure adequate resources. The wedding was finally called off in December 2020, as the groom’s family demanded gifts that the bride’s family could no longer afford. Saleem’s wife — attempting to run a house with an unemployed breadwinner, a son engaging in child-labour and a daughter whose wedding plans eroded under the crushing weight of poverty — described the moment as “the saddest Christmas of her life”.



## **Delusional Economics**

The spectacular failure of the state to provide any semblance of dignity to its people is supplemented with exaggerated claims of an imminent economic turnaround. Not only does belief in such a miracle replace any serious discussion on rethinking economic policies, it also becomes further justification for a political witch-hunt against all who disagree with the financial calculations of the elite. For example, during the Musharraf era, we were sold the pipe dream that development of the Gwadar Port was destined to transform the economy of Pakistan. Anyone who failed to show enthusiasm for the promised miracle (usually young Baloch affectees) were deemed foreign agents working to undermine Pakistan's progress. Today, the port city is still a militarised enclave making little contribution to the national exchequer. Yet, the project has fuelled a bloody insurgency in Balochistan, resulting in military operations and the increasing use of enforced disappearances in the province.

Similarly, since 2014, the country was sold the idea that China's investment in CPEC would be a "game-changer" for Pakistan. The usual fear and paranoia of enemy agents sabotaging the \$64 billion project was widely used to target dissidents across the country. Seven years later, most CPEC projects are stalled, the country is increasingly indebted to China and there are both national and global criticisms on the lack of transparency around Chinese investments.<sup>[19]</sup>

Despite the fact that such dreams have turned into nightmares, the state has intensified its efforts to pursue projects that are financially and environmentally unsustainable. In 2020, the federal government announced it would take over two islands off the coast of Sindh to turn them into tourist resorts. The ill-conceived idea led to protests against the disastrous environmental consequences of such a move for Sindh's ecology, forcing the government to revoke its ordinance.

Similarly, in Punjab the government is planning to construct a new city along the River Ravi, a project that not only promises jobs in the construction industry, but is also termed "environmentally-friendly" by government spokespersons. In reality, the project would pave over some of the most fertile agricultural land around Lahore in order to build housing for the rich, undermining both the environment as well as local food

security. Moreover, the plan envisions buying agricultural land from farmers at the ridiculously low rate of Rs. 200,000 per acre, for which they would lose their livelihoods and find it difficult to even rent a room in Lahore for just a year. Once the luxury housing is built, the land prices are expected to rise exponentially, facilitating a cruel form of profiteering at the expense of poor farmers. When farmers protested against this blatant injustice in March 2021, the government responded by lodging cases against them, once again revealing the intimate link between development and coercion in Pakistan.<sup>[20]</sup>

In an economy where the developmental logic is intertwined with authoritarianism, it is not surprising that the military would use its privilege as an unaccountable institution to become a major stakeholder in business. Over the past forty years, the military has ventured in businesses as diverse as agriculture, food products, fertilisers, oil and gas, construction works and marriage halls, involving a total of 50 lucrative corporate entities. One of the most successful businesses run by the military is the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), a chain of housing societies formed through arbitrary laws during General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship. Ostensibly, the purpose of these land grants was to meet the housing needs of military personnel. Today, however, they have become the most profitable real estate investments in Pakistan, providing housing for elites across eight cities and making retired military officers real estate tycoons across the country.

Repeated attempts by legislators and the judiciary to investigate widespread claims of corruption and land grabs by DHA have been blocked, highlighting the military's unparalleled ability to run an opaque financial empire. Of course, those who insist on transparency are quickly labelled traitors, a situation that allows for the merging of the political crisis with the economic emergency.<sup>[21]</sup> Tragically, this theft is justified by invoking how the sacrifice given by soldiers for the country. Yet, these housing societies only benefit senior army officers while retired soldiers are often compelled to work for minimum wage at private security companies geared towards protecting the elites. These companies too are run by retired military officers, illustrating the entrenched class hierarchy within the military that makes generalised comments about institutions empirically untenable.

## **Imperialist Stranglehold**

Pakistan's specific role in the global political economy as a rentier state fuels not only the increasing militarisation of society but also exacerbates the further appropriation of public resources by local and global elites. Exploitation by foreign powers became an integral part of the Indian subcontinent with the colonial era. Professor Utsa Patnaik's in-depth research shows how exploitation of agricultural, mineral and labour resources of India was central to the rise of capitalism in England. The acquisition of cheap raw materials from India facilitated England's industrial development while simultaneously immiserating the public, including creating multiple famines in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Patnaik argues that British exploitation cost the subcontinent a total of \$45 trillion, more than the total economy of the subcontinent today.<sup>[22]</sup>

Pakistan's relation to the IMF is a continuation of this longer history of exploitation. A "national" elite facilitates global capital and rents out its territory for the strategic interests of foreign powers. The Pakistani elite has failed to initiate internal reforms that could create a dynamic and forward-looking economy. Instead, the ruling bloc is an alliance between moribund feudal and corporate interests backed by a militarised state. Such a degenerate configuration would imminently collapse under its own weight if not propped up through external support.

International Financial Institutions are the ventilator for our clinically-dead economy and its myopic managers. Analysing why the IMF continues to lend to Pakistan despite the country's poor record in implementing reforms, Ehtisham Ahmad and Aziz Ali Mohammed characterise the country as a strategic asset for the US, which artificially props up its economy through loans. This was the case under the dictatorships of General Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf, who leased out Pakistani territory for America's wars in neighbouring Afghanistan in return for an influx of dollars.<sup>[23]</sup>

Even when Pakistan is out of favour with the West, such as in the 1990s or the 2010s (both democratic eras), the IMF continues to ensure that the country (barely) manages to keep its economy afloat. The reason is that Pakistan is a nuclear power of 220 million whose collapse would create a situation even worse than the nightmare in Syria. This arrangement works

well for Pakistan's ruling classes, who sustain their extravagant lifestyles by threatening to commit national suicide if the West stops propping them up. [24] The result is that the Pakistani economy is caught in a vicious cycle: foreign aid leads to consumption-led growth in which the country's elites mimic foreign lifestyles by purchasing imported goods while investing the surplus money in short-term speculative schemes rather than spending on boosting production and on human development. When the artificial boom eventually leads to a balance of payment crisis (too many imports without sufficient exports), the country's economy nosedives, only to be rescued by another loan from its protectors in Washington.

This cycle has severe consequences for ordinary people who bear the brunt of the elite's excessive indulgence. While the state continues to offer financial gifts to the ruling classes, ordinary people enter the economic equation only to bear the costs of this excessive borrowing. The most obvious source of scapegoating the public is higher taxes on essential commodities without an increase in taxes on the wealthy. Such a regressive tax policy shifts the burden of loan repayment onto marginalised classes, who neither borrowed nor benefited from the entire process. Yet, these same classes are expected to bailout the country by accepting inflation and a subsequent reduction in real wages. In April 2021, the government committed to raising Rs. 1.27 trillion through price hikes to return loans to the IMF, revealing the intensity of sacrifice demanded from the public.

The IMF loans also come with strict conditionalities demanding that the state cut back its spending, almost exclusively hurting the poor. In 2019, the Imran Khan government cut the Higher Education Budget by 40 percent as part of IMF's directive to "reduce budget deficits", a move that led to an abrupt end to scholarships for students from poor households and sharp fee hikes, making higher education less accessible for ordinary people. Moreover, the PTI-led government also froze the incomes of government employees, denying them the usual annual increment of a 15 percent raise that has been provided for years. This move massively affected the professional middle class including school teachers, health workers, clerks, railway workers and a number of other public sector employees.

The deepening crisis led to a surge of worker protests across the country. In October 2020, thousands of public sector employees descended

upon the capital city of Islamabad in a protest called “IMF Out”, opposing austerity imposed by the government at the behest of international creditors. The government responded by firing tear-gas at the protestors, creating scenes of a war zone as they arrested peaceful organisers of the demonstration. Similarly, in December 2020, teachers from across Pakistan converged on Islamabad to demand better wages. They were met with water cannons followed by tear-gas to disperse them in one of the most outrageous attacks on teachers in the country’s history. This repression highlighted an entrenched norm in which decisions imposed by foreign and domestic technocrats are not only rubber-stamped by elected governments, but also have the backing of the coercive state.

### **Violence of the Economy**

Today, 36 percent of Pakistan’s budget is spent returning loans. This exchange between predatory creditors and degenerate elites is mediated by endless suffering of the general public. In fact, citizens are perpetually called upon to sacrifice themselves for the economic health of the nation, adding a theological dimension to the logic of disposability imposed upon society. They must accept cuts to social services, be physically displaced, give up expectations of social mobility for their children, and suffer inflation and prolonged abandonment “for the greater good”, turning their suffering into a historical necessity. Yet no such necessity constrains the elites, who continue to accrue privileges in the worst moments of economic crises. Those refusing to participate in this oblation are viewed as renegades, inviting militarised and often extra-legal forms of violence from the powers that be.

Karl Marx demonstrated how each social formation is shaped by the manner in which the society’s surplus is expropriated by the ruling classes. Under capitalism, the bourgeoisie is subjected to the law of value that requires them to squeeze more and more unpaid labour out of the working class. This process leads to increasing forms of alienation among workers who are pressed to work longer for less wages, a phenomenon termed the “tyranny of time” by historian E.P. Thompson. Moreover, it results in the production of surplus populations that are kept unemployed unless they are needed for exploitation by Capital.

While there is more recognition of the economic arguments given by Marx, there is not enough engagement with his political argument against the liberal rhetoric of rights. He suggested that the current economic system tends towards authoritarianism because the pursuit of endless profit is not compatible with democracy and civil liberties. The promise of freedom championed by liberals is impossible to attain within the confines of the current economic order geared towards subjugating the labour of others and discarding a large number of people from the economy.

In “The Jewish Question”, Marx noted that bourgeois society aims to create juridical and political equality while reproducing and intensifying wage-slavery in the economic realm. This results in a situation where an individual is at once an abstract citizen endowed with rights and a helpless subject whose fate depends on the whims of the rich. More precisely, an individual becomes a political subject recognised by the state as an equal part of the “nation”, yet the emphasis on individual rights and economic hierarchies in civil society creates an egotistical human oriented towards pursuing private property at the expense of the common good. The glaring gap between the political rhetoric of rights and the private realm of profits creates conditions in which the right of rich individuals to security eventually trumps other values such as the civil liberties of ordinary citizens.<sup>[25]</sup>

Today, another dimension of this inequality is becoming visible. The growing gap between the worlds of the affluent and the poor is leading to right-wing populism across the globe. Right-wing mobilisations often occur against the hypocrisy of established politicians who speak of freedom and liberty but push economic policies detrimental to the interests of working-class families. Yet, this popular rage does not always express itself in economic or class terms. We are increasingly witnessing strong identitarian tendencies among the dispossessed who identify with rich men from their racial/religious community (such as Trump for white working-class men) — men who end up scapegoating vulnerable sections of society (including immigrants, women, ethnic and religious minorities) for the economic mess created by the elites. This form of “Global Trumpism” is leading to socio-political tribalism that undermines class solidarity while dismantling legal protections in liberal democracies in places as diverse as India, the US,

Brazil and the Philippines. If the current tendency of unemployment and economic monopolisation continues, states will use more militarised force to control unanchored masses, a scenario for which “democracy” will become an anachronistic term.

Therefore, inequality, separation and invisibilisation create the materialist context in which political despotism thrives. Without questioning such monstrous exploitation in society, democracy becomes an intra-elite affair in which the masses remain disposable, regardless of whether the words invoked to justify their misery is patriotism, development or freedom. As a result, the notion of democracy loses its appeal for the masses who increasingly view it as façade for an exploitative system. The third thesis, therefore, is on the intimate link between economic exploitation, social indignity and political authoritarianism in Pakistan.

*Pakistan has a separatist elite that wishes to remove itself from the general masses. It directs economic policies to subsidise corporate, feudal and military interests at the expense of the general public. This moribund economic structure is sustained by foreign aid in exchange for the country's services as a rentier state to global powers. As a result, we witness a permanent economic emergency in which the masses are forced to sacrifice their interests in the name of the alleged economic health of the nation. The fight for political democracy will remain untenable without challenging the economic model fuelling inequality, fear and militarisation in society.*

## MANUFACTURING IDENTITY

*I know East Pakistan more than the East Pakistanis themselves.*

General Yahya Khan, 1971

Nation-states are a modern phenomenon that aim to bring together disparate groups under a common territory. Such convergence requires a common narrative that weaves together the disparate cultural, linguistic, historical and territorial forms of belonging of the constituent elements of a geographical region. In the words of scholar Benedict Anderson, a nation is an “imagined community” rather than a concrete, empirical reality.

This implies that nationalism and state-building are necessarily incomplete projects that presume the willingness to accept pluralism within a given territorial space. While nationalism is, strictly speaking, a fictitious concept, it does not mean it cannot play a progressive role in history. For example, much of the Republican tradition against feudalism in Europe was steeped in the idea of national sovereignty against the absolutism of obsolete monarchies. Similarly, anti-colonial nationalism played a decisive role in the defeat of direct colonialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even today movements such as Palestinian or Kurdish nationalism pose challenges to authoritarian regimes.

The importance of nationalism stems from the fact that it became the dominant form in which questions of popular sovereignty, democracy and citizenship were expressed in modernity. Even for socialist revolutions, national territory became the decisive rung in which class contradictions played out and where revolutionaries could begin constructing an alternative vision of the world. Despite many people terming national sovereignty irrelevant for progressive causes, it is still being invoked by the Left in Latin America, Southern Europe and many parts of Africa against



the absolute dictatorship of global finance. Without a notion of territorial sovereignty, the future would turn into a dystopia controlled by large corporations and security companies, with ordinary people transformed into passive sufferers of predatory exploitation.

On the other hand, for the most of its history, the idea of nationalism has proven to be a major cause of anxiety for modern states. Unfortunately, Pakistan is a stark example where state-backed nationalism is used viciously to wipe out dissent rather than to facilitate a democratic political project. From its inception, the Pakistani state chose a definition of *Pakistaniat* that precluded any form of cultural, linguistic or religious belonging that neatly fit into its fictitious categories. The primary identity recognised by the state was that of “Muslim”, a theological marker that demanded subsumption of all other forms of belonging within this master identity. The result is that we are stuck with a specific point of view of state officials masquerading as a universal narrative, with all the chaos and violence generated by this distortion.

### **Distortion of History**

The Urdu-Bengali controversy in the 1950s is symptomatic of how the state aimed to create an insular conception of the nation with little room for divergence, let alone dissent. Urdu was viewed as the ‘Muslim’ language while Bengali was seen as a regional language and hence unworthy of being treated equally. There was no theological dimension to Urdu and its designation as “Muslim” was contingent upon the specific history of Muslim nationalism in the subcontinent, yet it was deployed by the postcolonial state to guard the contours of cultural identity. Bengali was only recognised after bloody clashes between protestors and the police that left a dozen people dead on February 21, 1953. Eighteen years later, cultural marginalisation combined with economic and political exploitation tore apart the country, leading to the creation of Bangladesh. The event marks the potency of cultural anxiety among marginalised regions and the stubbornness of the Pakistani state in addressing them.<sup>[26]</sup>

Ironically, in the 1990s the state clamped down upon the Urdu-speaking community in Karachi for organising around Muhajir identity, which supposedly posed a threat to the country’s territorial integrity. Since then, hundreds of young members of the Urdu-speaking community have faced

repeated excesses at the hands of the state, signaling the abrupt shifts from their designation as friends to enemies according to shifts in the calculus of the ruling elites. [\[27\]](#)

The pattern of denying the cultural, social and historically heterogeneity of different marginalised groups has only accelerated over time, repressing linguistic difference and suppressing popular memory to create the ideal national subject. As all decadent ruling elites know, disciplining populations requires disciplining their memories since controlling the past is a gateway to controlling the future.

This explains the obsession of the Pakistani state with determining an ontological “origin” for Pakistan. School curriculum teaches Pakistan’s origins as located in the early Muslim communities of different Muslim empires over the past millennia, identifying with Afghan and Central Asian invaders of Hindustan, with an exclusive focus on Muslim leaders during the colonial and anti-colonial period. In my own experience as a teacher, I noticed that the following sequence formed the historical consciousness of Pakistani youth that have been fed the official version of Pakistan studies.

“Pakistan’s history began with Muhammad Bin Qasim’s invasion of Sindh. It was strengthened with raids by Mahmood of Ghaznavi and Ghauri, which were followed by Mughal rule. Decline of Mughals led to colonial rule, which favoured Hindus over Muslims. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Allama Iqbal enlightened Muslims about their situation, prompting them to gain independence under the leadership of Quaid-e-Azam. Then came the 1992 World Cup victory under Imran Khan that lifted the spirits of the nation. Later, Khan decided to lead an “unprecedented” struggle against corruption in Pakistan and became the Prime Minister”. [\[28\]](#)

This ahistorical, broken, simplistic and contradictory view of history informs large segments of popular memory, particularly among the country’s youth. For much of the country’s “educated” population, there is a real spatial and temporal dislocation at the heart of their identity. We are unsure whether our origin is within the lands we inhabit or whether we come from elsewhere. Moreover, we skip large portions of our historical experience when we fail to recognise our region’s ancient civilisations, ignore non-Muslim political formations during the medieval period, use a narrow lens to look at the broad and heterogeneous characteristics of the anti-colonial movement, or deny the enormous sacrifices of pro-democracy

forces in Pakistan. Eventually, we are left with a truncated version of history in which time moves passively only to be punctuated by the periodic rise of Muslim heroes. Naturally, this empty time is filled by the State that retains a monopoly over selecting characters to be celebrated and those to be repressed. In this way, history becomes a tool for “mis-educating” the masses.

### **Cognitive Disorientation**

The aim is to deprive the public of the ability to map themselves in time and space so that they become malleable for the statist project. Identity, after all, is a contingent relationship of people with communities, the state and popular memory. If popular memory can be repressed, or better still *rewired*, then the citizen can be turned into a slave willingly attached to his/her subjection. Moreover, by removing all struggles that disrupt the homogenising narrative of the state, the ruling elite can sell the infinite repetition of the same as a “break from the past” by packaging puppets as revolutionaries. Depriving a generation of history is tantamount to wiping out the horizon through which they can measure their actions within the present, and thus facilitating abuse of their desire for change.

The state’s aim has been to create a homogenous community that not only has an identical future and present, but also a common past. Yet, a key lesson of psychoanalysis teaches that repression does not entail an end to unwanted facts. Repressed memories take on a life of their own within the unconscious and resurface in the guise of monstrous symbols intruding into conscious life. The transformation of historical facts into terrifying symbols is a result of our inability to process reality in a healthy and mature manner.

Fear appears as exaggerated suspicion and perpetual construction of enemies, along with a host of absurd contradictions. For example, we are taught to identify with foreign invaders but a Pashtun nationalist identifying with Afghanistan can lead to charges of sedition because it “undermines our territorial integrity”. We are encouraged to glorify Muslim warriors of the past, yet if someone chooses to become a *mujahid* (warrior) against the wishes of Pakistan’s Western backers, then that individual would be deemed a terrorist. We are asked to examine our national past but if one touches the events that led to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, then they will become subject to censorship. In other words, erasure becomes a central

pillar of the state's ideological offensive against ideas that do not conform to its own narratives.

Two recent incidents illustrate the sense of paranoia pervading our state regarding identity and memory. An online conference was organised on the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 by Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) faculty aiming to bring Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi scholars together to analyse the tragic events that led to a civil war and monstrous forms of violence against the people of Bengal. For too long, Pakistanis have been unable to publicly discuss the actions of the Pakistan military in which murder and rape were used as strategic weapons against our Bengali brothers and sisters. The conference was hailed by many academics as evidence that Pakistanis were finally willing to move past the trauma attached to the war by openly discussing taboo topics. They were wrong.

Less than a week prior to the event, a few right-wing activists and thinkers flagged the conference as an anti-Pakistan event. Rather than ignoring the conference — when has an academic conference ever destabilised a country? — officials from intelligence agencies threatened the university administration, demanding that they cancel the event. Meanwhile, the vitriol directed against the professors doing their job grew increasingly vile, with many calling for sedition charges against the organisers. Eventually, the university disallowed the conference, displaying the excessive fear shaping the state's relation to our actual past.

Another incident involved my former student at Punjab University, Alamgir Wazir. Hailing from Waziristan, the young man had lost over 10 members of his family, including his father, to terrorism by the Taliban. He harbors anger towards the state, arguing that Pakistan's dual policy in relation to the Taliban was responsible for the tragedy inflicted upon his region and family.

His indignation was evident when he spoke in Lahore at the Students Solidarity March in November 2019, when Left-wing student groups held protests in over 50 cities across the country, demanding student rights. In his speech, Alamgir spoke out against religious extremism and accused the country's military and civilian leadership of having blood on their hands. The next day Alamgir was abducted from Punjab University, tortured and later presented in court, where he was accused of sedition.

This was an extremely difficult period as a number of individuals, including myself, were charged with sedition for participating in the student protest. At that point, the Chairman of Senate Human Rights Committee, Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar, invited us to present our case at the next Senate hearing. We went prepared to face the absurd allegations that we were part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government or to call a revolt against the military. Our defence was that mere criticism of the military's policies cannot be equated with attempts to overthrow the state, and that the state would have to show some evidence to establish the presence of an actual conspiracy.

To our utter surprise, the main charge at the proceedings was not Alamgir's criticism of the military or civilian leadership in his speech at the student march, but his brief reference to Urdu being imposed on the Pashtun people. The palpable anger of some of the Senators and other dignitaries was disconcerting. They were of the view that as a Muslim nation, terming Urdu an imposition was a mischaracterisation of facts and was an affront to the people of Pakistan. I responded by offering to accept that his words could have been intellectual naivety on his part and perhaps demonstrated needless aggression. But did it really merit a sedition case against a young, broken man who might have to serve a life sentence for this kind of error?

The response from at least half the audience was extremely worrying. They asserted that Urdu was the linguistic foundation of the nation and that challenging it is tantamount to undermining the unity and sovereignty of Pakistan. In other words, expressing one's discomfort with a language was nothing short of treason, as it challenged a "foundational truth" of the nation. Wazir remained in jail for four months before he was released on bail — all of us remain out on bail. This episode highlighted the intimate link between absurdity and cruelty that shapes official ideology in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, we are dealing with an ideological machine that purges its own people due to suspicion of their impurity. The class and ethnic fault lines are erased from popular consciousness through the imposition of a narrow definition of "Muslim", while there is also increasing anxiety about the precise meaning of the term Muslim itself. This explains why it was necessary to purge "false Muslims" such as Ahmediyyas from the "true" Muslim community. This process of suspicion has also fuelled sectarian violence in Pakistan with different groups blaming each other for not being

Muslim enough. The mushrooming of blasphemy charges over the past 4 decades, the majority of which are leveled by Muslims against fellow Muslims, is a logical conclusion to the impossible desire for a pristine and homogenous identity.

This psychosis reaches the extreme when people are forced to question whether their everyday interactions are decadent or not. From women's clothing to *Basant* (a welcoming of the spring event of the Indian subcontinent) to even the bizarre debate about whether *khudahafiz* is a Muslim enough greeting or whether it needs to be replaced with *Allahhafiz*, suspicion pervades the very being of individuals who are expected to perpetually transform themselves (and others) to fit into the identitarian categories sanctioned by a paranoid state. This process begins with erasure, is backed by terror and induces reconstruction via shame. Erasure, terror and shame form the triad of identity offered by the Pakistani state.

### **Cracks in the System**

There are, however, many young people who fail to be integrated into the system — unwilling to passively consume a contradictory and mediocre narrative constructed by the ruling classes. They reside in the cracks of the system, inhabiting its internal gaps and hence are open to a different view of their relation to the past and the future. This difference can be the result of encountering an alternative tradition through family and friends, engaging with “dangerous books” that provide an alternative viewpoint or a personal experience such as protesting against an unjust situation.

Such experiences are transformative for individuals, as they shatter the fragile stability of imposed identity and open one to new, unforeseen encounters. The finitude of state sanctioned narratives, with its violently patrolled ideological borders, gives way to an infinity of possibilities from the past, present and future by incorporating oneself into alternative forms of belonging that exceed the limits set by the state, transforming the sense of shame attached to difference into a vehicle for overcoming the suffocation of a defaulting present.

There are multiple manifestations of these transformations gripping young people in contemporary Pakistan. For example, many young Pashtun citizens found their voice in the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, calling for an end to the unrestrained state violence in Pashtun lands and to the

connotation of fear and terror attached to Pashtun bodies. For the very first time, they felt they need not be embarrassed about their culture and past, that they truly belong in the world as equals, and that they can finally stare back at the previously intimidating enemy.

We saw that among students during the Students Solidarity March in November 2019 when many young people, who were not allowed to use their university premises without permission from aggressive security guards, took over the Mall Road in Lahore with red flags, standing tall and proud as they called for respecting their constitutional right to association. [29] We have the example of defiant young women taking to the streets of Pakistan's major cities annually under the banner of Aurat March, no longer ashamed of their bodies and asserting their equality in public.

We see similar displays of passion when young, urban activists work with slum dwellers fighting for the right to housing, when university professors connect with farmers battling for land rights or when doctors and factory workers stand together for the implementation of labour and environmental laws. These are instances when the actors involved violate the time/space boundaries of the dominant order. For why should professors and farmers be at the same place making similar demands? What brings together students and doctors with the workers movement? Why are women chanting "freedom" on the streets when they have only been taught to preserve their "modesty"?

The violation of a suffocating order, of moribund identities, of an insular existence propels the palpable enthusiasm of these "rebels". Such encounters deemed impossible by the system open up space for a new shared time, a new conception of the self and the other, a new comprehension of the past and a new confidence in the potentialities of the future. Erasure from the state is met with assertions of existence, fear is met with defiance, shame with pride. In this dialectic, the possibility of a new, free human is born.

It is no surprise that this possibility appears as outrageous rebellion to those in power as it threatens to "unmake" the fictitious world they have created. The Pakistani state, inheritor of the brutal legacy of the colonial apparatus, has developed an elaborate institutional vocabulary to demonise and punish those who exceed the limits of power. Hence, we have sedition

charges against Pashtun and student organisers, blasphemy charges against Aurat Marchers and terror charges against farmer and worker movement leaders. The aim is that we keep defending ourselves against accusations levelled by the tyrants rather than fighting the tyrants themselves. Challenging such nauseating allegations and accepting the pluralism of our past are central to defending our right to dissent and preserving peoples' dignity.

The fourth thesis on the political crisis of Pakistan therefore follows:

*The Pakistani state has an insular and contradictory definition of identity, which is premised upon the erasure of multiple histories and possibilities that shape its present. This process leads to endless repression to create subjects ashamed of any conception of the Self other than the fictitious identity constructed by the state. Yet, many young people perpetually exceed these boundaries by remembering forgotten histories, engaging in encounters deemed impossible, and imagining alternative conceptions of being and belonging. Appearing as a disruptive force to the dominant order, this excess is the source of the state's anxiety and the site for its brutal terror.*



## **WE THE SEDITIOUS PEOPLE!**

*In reality, Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his companions are working with Miss Fatima Jinnah for Pakhtunistan ... Pakistan is surrounded by enemies.*

A 1964 pamphlet by General Ayub Khan's Presidential campaign accusing his rival, Fatimah Jinnah, of being a foreign agent.

On February 6, 2019, a demonstration was held at Lahore's Liberty Chowk against the killing of Arman Loni, a teacher, a poet and a member of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement in Balochistan. At a protest against enforced disappearances in Lora Lai on February 4, 2019, Loni was brutally baton-charged by the police and sustained injuries to his head which proved fatal. He passed away a few days later.

The protest in Lahore was organised by students from various universities in the city who were outraged at the brutal killing of a teacher. The large number of demonstrators from different ethnic backgrounds pointed to the emergence of a burgeoning alliance between youth from the peripheries and the core of the country. Each speaker shared the horrors of militarised violence in their hometowns, the scourge of enforced disappearances, the plight of political prisoners, and the constant state of fear in which many live. I also gave a short speech at the event, reiterating support of the ethnically dominant Punjabi group to our Baloch and Pashtun brethren, as well as announcing solidarity in future activities against increasing state violence.

This protest took place in the midst of our campaign against the 'Sahiwal Killings.' A few days earlier, on January 18, 2019, the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) gunned down alleged terrorists in an operation near the city of Sahiwal. The car, which was riddled with bullets

sprayed by officers of the CTD, was carrying an unarmed family from Lahore. Two men, a woman and her 13-year-old daughter were killed in this incident, which the CTD tried to sell as a counter-terrorism operation to the general public and an effort to rescue the allegedly kidnapped small children, who were pulled from the car covered in the blood of their parents. Public outrage over these killings reflected the anger against the impunity of law enforcement agencies, especially when small children were traumatised and the deceased were retroactively deemed terrorists.

Our group, the Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement (People's Rights Movement), called for a Shehri Tahaffuz March (Citizens Protection March) in Lahore for February 10, 2019. We made the case that the state's approach to anti-terrorism was being used to terrorise ordinary people, first discriminating against the Pashtuns, Sindhis, Muhajirs and Baloch, and now being deployed against the Punjabis as well. We argued that if we combined our sorrows, our collective pain could be transformed into a potent political front against state-led violence.

At the crack of dawn on February 9, our doorbell rang. Since we had been receiving threats for the past few days, we expected the worst. When we viewed the CCTV footage on our television, we saw both uniformed and plain-clothed men inside our house, past our main gate, holding guns at the front door. We used the intercom to communicate with one of the officers who suggested I surrender immediately. Sensing the danger, a confrontational stance could lead to, I emerged to offer my arrest.

The dozen officers present were shocked when they saw my wife Tabitha Spence, an American citizen, accompany me outside. Later I learned that they had been told that I was an NDS agent but after seeing Tabby, they feared that I could be part of a larger global conspiracy.<sup>[30]</sup>

They informed me that they were there to take me into custody for participating in an "anti-state" protest. As one of the officers tried to take me away, Tabby intervened and asked for the arrest warrant. The intelligence officer chuckled and asked me to get into the van. Tabby stayed firm and did not let me leave. Sensing the agitation of the gun wielding officers, I feared they may harm Tabby and asked her to let me go. This led to a slightly comical situation where intelligence officers, policemen and I were all pleading with Tabby to let me go but she adamantly refused. One

officer turned to me saying, “What kind of a husband are you? Your wife does not even listen to you.” I retorted, “Not sure why my wife is being disobedient when I am asking her to let me be abducted.” After this, Tabby and I were both shoved into the van and taken to a police station.

While my parents and friends Aima Khosa and Ziyad Faysal joined us at the police station, I was whisked away in an unmarked car to be interrogated. A gun was held to my head as I listened to the officers discuss their petty office gossip, a less than glorious conversation to hear if one was about to depart from the world. When we reached the interrogation site, however, what followed was revealing of the dark comedy that characterises our state.

The officer who ostensibly led the operation asked me whether I was Pashtun and a central leader of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM). I replied in the negative, explaining that I am a Punjabi who supports the PTM’s position against the militarisation of society. This led to a number of questions. Why did someone with a PhD from Cambridge University choose to come back and teach in public sector universities? Why was my bank balance so low and why was I living in a small house rather than at my parents’ house? What is my interest in engaging with trade unions and farmer associations in the country?

In brief, my response was that my activities are shaped by my identification with socialist ideals and that, despite my inadequacies, I try my best to follow the example of revolutionaries I admire. The interrogator shook his head and responded,

“You are an innocent man because you don’t understand how this place works. They made all these damning allegations in the intelligence files against you, despite knowing they were false. This system is irrevocably broken and your naïve idealism won’t fix it. Your problem is you love this country too much but people here don’t value love, they want obedience. I feel sorry for you because they have killed people like you. Leave the country before it’s too late. I am also planning to leave for Australia where my uncle lives.”

I was released the next day by court order, but this conversation stayed with me.<sup>[31]</sup> A man charged with the responsibility of defending the ideological and spatial boundaries of the country did not care for either. He knew the system was rigged and that allegations of people being “anti-state” were a hoax to undermine dissidents. He did not even feel that the country was worth fighting for, demonstrating the vacuity of the official narrative, which

is veiled by the ceaseless propaganda and brutal violence of the state. Most disturbingly, he knew that those who felt too passionately about this land and its people were a threat to the country's ruling elites, who have never hesitated to physically wipe out their opponents.

### **Politics of Terror**

I was fortunate to have been released (though the case is still under trial along with the sedition charges brought against me in December 2019) due to my class and ethnic privilege. Many people from the country's peripheries are less fortunate once they are deemed to be anti-state. Hundreds of Baloch youth today are "missing" i.e., victims of the odious policy of enforced disappearances carried out by the Pakistani state. Images of Baloch women weeping along with pictures of their missing sons, brothers and spouses are among the most iconic symbols of the past decade as they demand the return of their loved-ones who exist in a zone somewhere between life and death.

Missing persons are the political prisoners of our era as they are targets of state violence due to their opposition to the status quo. Before the policy of enforced disappearances was operationalised, such individuals were merely arrested and the ensuing trial and punishment took place in the public domain. Yet, precisely for this reason, political prisoners turned their suffering into a public spectacle, with confrontations in court and hunger strikes in jail. Since colonial times, the public often viewed political prisoners as embodying the pain and suffering of the nation, undermining the sovereignty of the state and making jails sites that create political celebrities.

Going to prison, therefore, was not a sign of embarrassment but rather a rite of passage for political leaders representing the will of the people. By deploying the technique of making people 'go missing,' those in power aim to deny a public hearing to political prisoners. When activists go missing, not only are their bodies rendered invisible, but their side of the story also remains missing in the narrative surrounding them, ensuring both invisibilisation and silencing of the victims.

Such terrifying policies call into question the nature of the ruling system in which we live. Despite calling itself a 'Republic,' characterising opponents as mortal enemies constitutes one of the central political

principles of our country's ruling logic. True Republicanism demands the state accept dissent as an integral part of the public sphere. This is why Thomas Jefferson considered ways in which different interest groups with diverging views could be represented within the American republic. In its more radical articulation, Rousseau asserted the importance of creating a unifying force against particular interests that threatened the common interests of the Republic. But even in his vision, only a transparent and rational debate could lead to the formation of the general will that is both inclusive and sustainable.

On the other hand, Pakistan's state has the tendency to view all forms of dissent as treason. Such an absurd equation undermines the concept of Republicanism while evicting opponents from the legitimate political community. Once the state designates a citizen as an enemy, it opens that individual to both legal and extra-legal forms of sovereign violence. In Pakistan, the excessive invocation of the labels of "enemy" and "traitor" signals that war is central to the unconscious of our state, seeing dissension as rebellion and facilitating rule by fear rather than reason.

Frankly, there is no serious threat to the cohesion of Pakistan. Different regions of the country are integrated into the federal structure (Sindh is home to Muhajirs and Pashtuns, Balochistan is divided along ethnic and tribal lines, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is economically doing better than neighbouring Afghanistan), discouraging centrifugal forces. Moreover, there is hardly any global appetite for ethnic warfare in Pakistan as the country's descent into warlordism would be a terrifying scenario that would make current war zones look like a walk in the park.

Yet, it is natural for young people to question the insular identity promoted by the state, especially as they learn about other repressed identities from their past. This could lead to critical and at times harsh words that express separatist sentiments. This is not unique to Pakistan. Hundreds of students at universities around the world proudly claim anarchist and separatist tendencies and call for the dissolution of the state. Rational state actors ignore such murmurings to focus on the larger economic and geo-strategic questions posed by history.

Yet, our state betrays its vulnerability when it acts upon the slightest of provocations. Students have been abducted for "subversive" Facebook posts, people are censored for questioning the military budget and many

have been killed for opposing state-led violence. Instead of ignoring criticism by the youth (or better yet, learning from them), state officials react as petty feudals who feel dishonoured by “insulting” comments. This is particularly true when the criticism is directed at the military, which has time and again displayed its sensitivity towards public scrutiny. Akin to a feudal patriarch, the coercive apparatus of the state engages in violence against “disobedient” subjects to restore its “honour,” revealing its irrational and cruel nature while causing immense suffering in society.

### **Proliferation of Traitors**

Such paranoia has led the state to view social and political movements as foreign conspiracies, deemed traitors by political opponents. This term is deployed strategically to delegitimise dissent by equating it with treason. Initially, the charge was used against leaders of ethnically marginalised groups as part of the “national” project to forcefully integrate peripheries into the center’s hegemonic framework. Leaders such as Abdul Ghaffar Khan and GM Syed, from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh respectively, were among the first leaders accused of being foreign agents and traitors. Khan was a respected anti-colonial leader of Pashtuns who opposed the creation of Pakistan but pledged loyalty to the new nation-state after its creation. Syed, on the other hand, was a primary leader of the Pakistan Movement in Sindh but later fell out of favour over his criticism of the postcolonial ruling elites, showing that there was a thin line separating patriots from traitors.<sup>[32]</sup>

One of the most absurd allegations of treason was launched against Fatima Jinnah, the sister of the founding father and widely revered as the ‘Mother of the Nation’. These smears were a result of Ms. Jinnah’s decision to challenge General Ayub Khan’s dictatorial rule in the Presidential election of 1964. Not only was the ‘Mother of the Nation’ deemed a traitor, but the election was rigged to ensure that Ayub Khan continued to lead an authoritarian regime. The consequences were even worse in East Pakistan after opposition leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won the election of 1970. The results were rejected by the military junta and political leaders in West Pakistan, sedition charges were framed against Mujib and his party (Awami League) while a brutal military operation was launched against East Pakistan in 1971, culminating in the creation of Bangladesh — perhaps the

only event in modern history in which a majority population ceded from a minority.

Another commonly invoked allegation against opposition political figures is that they are agents of RAW, India's intelligence agency. Popular political parties such as the Awami League (of East Pakistan), PPP, MQM, ANP and Baloch nationalists have all been accused of being RAW agents, a narrative that makes little analytical contribution other than unintentionally projecting RAW as the most popular political organisation in the country. I remember how in 2016 there were posters across Okara warning of the presence of "RAW agents" and demanding vigilance as a national duty, giving the impression that the city was about to witness an imminent fall at the hands of our eastern neighbour.

Beneath the surface, the real reason for the heightened "foreign threat" was a Tenant's Movement at the site of the Okara Military Farms, where peasants were demanding land rights. The Anjuman Mazareen Punjab (AMP) movement began organising tenants in 2000 against attempts by the military to evict them from their land. In 16 years, despite over a dozen deaths and hundreds of fake cases, the tenants managed to defend themselves, not giving an inch of their land to the military authorities. After allegations of a foreign conspiracy, police raided the home of tenant leader Mehr Abdul Sattar on April 15, 2016 and claimed to recover Indian currency from his residence.

Sattar was kept in a high security jail for four years and regularly tortured by authorities. In September 2020, the Lahore High Court dismissed allegations of a foreign conspiracy involving him and ordered his release. Sattar was released after years in jail, his health in ruins and the tenant's movement in disarray due to repression. This is one of the most blatant examples in which the threat of India and feelings of patriotism were placed at the service of a predatory policy against the weakest sections of society.

### **A Seditious People**

Pervasive paranoia about foreign threats receives legal cover through the infamous colonial sedition law. The law was used by the British to target anti-colonial activists who fought for the subcontinent's independence. Many of the stalwarts of the Freedom Movement, including Bhagat Singh,

Mohandas Gandhi and Maulana Muhammad Ali Johar were tried under this law. Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself was the defense lawyer for Congress leader Tilak as he faced a famous sedition case in 1916 for allegedly attempting to “deprive His majesty of his sovereignty over his Indian lands.”

Allegations of “foreign conspiracy” appeared particularly ridiculous in colonial conditions because they were imposed by a foreign occupying force against Indian patriots. In response to imperial arrogance, anti-colonial activists invoked the ‘sovereignty of the People’ as an alternative source of legitimacy for their opposition to the Empire. Notice that the category of the ‘People’ was formed in dissent, in rupturing from the logic of colonialism towards a world where fidelity to the People would be privileged over obedience towards lifeless institutions of the state. The people were always an insurgent, rebellious collective in whose name the postcolonial nations came into being.

It is then nothing less than tragic that the post-colonial states of India and Pakistan have both liberally used colonial sedition law against dissidents who invoke popular power. The fascist Modi government in India has used sedition laws against students, farmers and journalists across the country. Similarly, the Pakistani government has launched sedition charges against politicians, students, farmers, journalists, human rights activists and others who question the ruling apparatus. Recently, Hamid Mir and Asma Sherazi, two of the most popular TV anchors, were booked under sedition charges for speaking out against a physical assault against their fellow journalist, Asad Toor. Hamid Mir’s show Capital Talk has also been taken off air.

The charges of sedition levelled against citizens are outrageous because the independent nation was supposed to be a site of popular sovereignty where people themselves were the ruling subjects. If the people are the source of sovereign legitimacy, then who are they being seditious against? Surely, they cannot rebel against themselves. This contradiction reveals how the postcolonial state continues to privilege obedience to institutions and conformity to a fictitious identity over the insurgent and sovereign conception of the People formulated during the anti-colonial movement.

It is evident that claims of a foreign conspiracy betray the anxiety of the state. The colonial state that introduced this language of sedition was



representative of foreign domination, while the postcolonial state remains a rentier state for foreign powers. Thus, what truly appears foreign to the state are not external networks but internal elements that exceed the normative logic of raw power to create a different conception of being and belonging. The state aims to locate, discipline and exterminate this immanent excess to safeguard a failing order that promises nothing to the public other than indignity and misery. This explains why officials panic when faced with a social movement challenging the existing order and end up carrying out the farcical exercise of calling public dissent a conspiracy by RAW, CIA, Mossad, separatists or “foreign elements.”

These are all different words that convey the officialdom’s inability to nominate phenomena that do not fit into its given categories, making our political crisis a linguistic crisis. It sheds light on why my interrogator (as most state representatives) struggled to comprehend why anyone would leave the places assigned to them by the reigning system. These are forbidden places, foreign to the norms of a constricted world and hence potentially threatening to the entire order imposed upon ordinary people. Unfortunately, it is precisely these ephemeral possibilities that the counter-revolutionary machine of the state is geared towards eliminating, turning us prisoners of an eternal and mediocre present. The occupation of these taboo spaces is a key task for revolutionary politics.

In light of this discussion, let me then propose a thesis on the link between violence, sedition and popular sovereignty.

*Instead of viewing critics as engaged citizens, the state categorises them as enemies undeserving of rights. It cynically invokes ‘foreign conspiracies’ to delegitimise movements that challenge the narrow confines of the status quo, unleashing extra-legal and excessive forms of violence. Continuing the colonial legacy, the state has no other language to nominate popular movements other than that of sedition, provoking the proliferation of ‘traitors’ across the country. As a result, violence and erasure remain the dominant methods of engaging opponents, leading to tragic consequences for political workers and dissidents.*

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## MORAL PANIC

*If a woman is wearing very few clothes, it will have an impact on the men, unless they are robots.*

*Imran Khan, 2021*

On September 12, 2020, women organised charged protests across Pakistan against another horrendous and widely publicised case of sexual violence in the country. The victim was a mother who was traveling with her two children on the motorway between Lahore and Sialkot on the night of September 9, when her car ran out of fuel. At that moment, two gunmen held her hostage before raping her in front of her children. They left the scene with three ATM cards and jewelry worth Rs. 100,000. The shocking details of the incident stunned the entire country.

For women in Pakistan, the gruesome incident symbolised the constant shadow of violence they live under. The internet was filled with testimonies of women who had silently endured sexual abuse over the years, while many spoke out on the routine harassment they have faced on the streets, at workplaces and within universities. Passions ran high as protestors called for exemplary punishment for the rapists and adequate protection for women in Pakistan. More remarkably, many young women called for ending the pervasive rape culture in society, i.e., the social norms, ideological narratives and legal practices that shame victims into silence while providing impunity to perpetrators of sexual violence. One hoped that the long overdue reckoning in society regarding gender-based violence was on the horizon and that women would no longer be forced to experience existence as terror.

While the perpetrators were caught by the Punjab police after a month-long manhunt, the ideological shift expected from such mass outrage was

nowhere to be seen. On September 13, four days after the barbaric incident, and barely a day after countrywide protests, Lahore's police chief, Umar Sheikh, blamed the victim for being careless. He expressed "shock" at how a woman could leave the house so late at night with her children, an incredible case of misplaced anger by someone responsible for citizens' security. As anger piled up over Sheikh's attempt to blame the victim for a colossal security and moral failure, he "clarified" that his statement was only meant to warn "brothers and fathers" to be careful when giving women "permission" to leave the house. It was nothing less than tragic that the man investigating one of the most high-profile cases of sexual violence in recent history was more fixated on lecturing women over piety and appealing to a deranged sense of patriarchal honor rather than ensuring justice for the victim. <sup>[33]</sup>

### **Gender Anxieties**<sup>[34]</sup>

Such blatant attempts to link rape culture to women's piety points to a growing discourse in society that has a genealogy in the colonial era. Indian scholar Partha Chatterjee noted how the colonisation of India forced natives to accept that the public sphere belonged to an alien power. In order to advance in society, it was important to accept the terms of colonial rule, including the laws of the state and the ideology of progress and civilisation. This assimilation generated anxiety that the vast history and culture of the sub-continent were on the verge of being obliterated by colonial forces. In order to compensate, early nationalist thinkers relocated the "unchanging essence" of the nation to the cultural and religious domains, sites purportedly untainted by the colonial invasion. This "inner domain" became the focal point for the regeneration of the nation against the corrupting influence of British rule, a territory jealously guarded by nationalist thinkers throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is not surprising that women's bodies became the central space for inscribing the honor (and dishonor) of the nation. It was deemed necessary that women upheld the cultural norms of society as living proof of the vitality of their community, embodying the undying essence of the past despite the colonised present. This momentous burden placed on women by nationalists had catastrophic effects in the long-run, as women were increasingly viewed through the prism of communalism, with each

community emphasising the “piety” of women as a benchmark of their purity. Not only did this burden restrict the autonomy of women within anti-colonial struggles, it also opened them to allegations and violence from both outside and within religious communities. The most tragic events occurred during the Partition, when communal violence immediately turned into sexual violence against women of the “enemy communities,” underlying the dark side of this cultural revivalism.

As Pakistan continues to experience the loss of political and economic sovereignty due to its increasing suppression by foreign powers, the discourse of moral degeneration has reached delusional levels. There is a widespread fear that the last bastion of resistance against the West is the country’s family system, and hence it must be preserved in its present form at all costs. Any suggestion of reforms is viewed as a Western conspiracy to undermine the essence of the nation, eliminating the possibility of a rational dialogue on social change.<sup>[35]</sup> Alternative gender practices are immediately associated with foreign interventions and hence condemned as an affront to both religion and the nation. Controlling women’s bodies is a point of obsessive fixation that propels irrationality and mass hysteria in society.<sup>[36]</sup>

Numerous incidents have recently demonstrated the increasing trend of demonising assertive women as pro-West. The rampant suspicion and resentment shown towards Malala Yousufzai by Pakistani men is often couched in anti-imperialist terminology. A popular refrain is to ask why Malala left Pakistan for the West after being shot in the head by the Taliban in Swat, a question that itself symbolises the disorientation and envy, if not the outright cruelty of reactionary discourse in Pakistan. Why would a brilliant 14-year-old girl not leave the country if her life was constantly threatened, if she had just survived a bullet to her head while the world was offering her refuge? Unfortunately, the events were seen through the prism of the psychic structure created by colonial rule in which the narrative was reduced to the notion that “our girl left us for the West,” a scandalous proposition if you suppress all the messy details that influenced her decision to relocate and settle in Britain. The desperation to disown Malala was so strong that a satirical article written by liberal writer Nadeem Farooq Paracha, in which he claimed that she had Polish origins, was widely cited

as “proof” of her foreign origins, revealing the absurd but widespread appeal of conspiracy theories.<sup>[37]</sup>

Similarly, the discourse around women’s clothing has become a weapon of mass distraction to avoid discussion on the patriarchal nature of Pakistani families, the anti-woman bias in the legal apparatus of the state or a deep-seated backwardness regarding gender roles. The moral brigade in Pakistan today is led by none other than the prime minister himself. Imran Khan has appointed himself guardian of the nation’s morality, continuously using his various platforms to lecture the country on the harmful effects of “vulgarity” and the need for *pardah* (veiling) of women in society. In a recent interview on HBO, Khan not only blamed vulgarity for increasing sexual violence, but also claimed that only “robots” would not feel lustful towards women showing skin, a perverted comment that was condemned internationally, including by Khan’s former wife Jemima Khan Smith, who cautioned him against victim-blaming.

Women and their allies across the country responded with simple but pertinent questions to the prime minister. What exactly was the vulgarity exhibited by the five-year-old Zainab, who was brutally raped before being murdered in the city of Kasur in 2019? How was it the fault of women that a high-profile cleric was caught sexually molesting his student two days prior to Khan’s irresponsible statement? And why is it that the premier is diverting conversation towards women’s bodies when he should be focusing on ensuring that women feel safe in the public sphere?

Yet, Khan’s words resonated with large sections of society, exhibiting the extent of the crisis of masculinity in Pakistan. Support poured in from conservatives who called women’s rights advocates “anti-Islam” and insinuated that they were part of a foreign conspiracy to undermine the country’s values. In a country ranked 178 on the global index on women’s rights, there were calls on national TV to respect men’s rights, which are presumably under threat from feminists. A number of high-profile public figures started linking women’s clothing choice to the violence they experience, giving a common analogy that bees have no choice but to be attracted to honey. It was incredibly tragic to see how after thousands of years of evolution, men in Pakistan were comparing women to honey and

themselves to bees, a remarkable regression propelled by patriarchal irrationality.<sup>[38]</sup>

### **Mass Hysteria**

This madness reached its zenith after the Aurat March of 2021. Since 2018, this annual Women's Day event has brought together feminists in major cities of Pakistan every March 8 to assert their right to exist in public spaces and challenge patriarchy in all its forms. Over the years, the movement has included concerns of working-class women for fair wages, Baloch and Pashtun women fighting for the return of their missing relatives, female students in universities battling systemic harassment on campuses and other taboo topics. The confidence with which young women organise, lead and defend their campaign against vicious attacks from conservative quarters opens up the possibility of a different kind of a future, where equality would not be a distant ideal, but would shape our practices in the here and now.

Owing to the pandemic, this year's Aurat March was centered on women's health issues in Pakistan. Thousands of women in Lahore, Karachi and Multan rallied under the banner of Aurat March. In Hyderabad and Islamabad, rallies were held under the banner of Aurat Azaadi March, an allied feminist group that openly expresses its socialist leanings. The massive turnout at the women-led events was remarkable. It represented the pent-up anger of women not only due to everyday sexism but also as a response to the horrifying cases of sexual violence that have dominated public discussions over the past year. Moreover, the Aurat Azaadi March in Islamabad in 2020 was violently attacked by religious bigots in broad daylight. Hosting successful and festive marches in the wake of such incidents was an impressive show of defiance against violent patriarchal reaction.

Soon after the events, however, a well-orchestrated campaign was launched to defame the movement and depict it as a plot against religion. Doctored videos of the event circulated in order to show the participants were chanting slogans against Islam. Moreover, placards were blatantly misconstrued to portray them as targeting religious figures. Even worst, images of the flag of Women Democratic Front (the main organiser of Aurat Azaadi March) were circulated as the French flag to "prove" that feminists were in cahoots with Emmanuel Macron's alleged agenda to

defame the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Before anyone could respond to this mass hysteria, blasphemy charges were registered against the organisers in Peshawar, forcing many vocal feminists to go underground to avoid persecution.

These incidents show the power of ideology in shaping how we perceive reality. If assertive and independent women are associated with irreligiosity and Western domination in popular consciousness, then their show of strength on the streets of Pakistan could only be understood as a demonic/foreign attack on national culture. Ideology mediates what we see and choose not to see and literally manufactures phantoms that serve to instill hate in the public. The ensuing crisis meant that the women's demands were drowned out under a chorus stemming from mass hysteria. In this case, the phantom used to fuel this frenzy was blasphemy accusations, a charge etched into society's unconscious as a potent source of an intense, murderous anxiety.

### **A Blasphemous People**

Accusations of blasphemy have given rise to a politics of suspicion that unfortunately shapes the public's relation to religion in contemporary Pakistan. It is important to remember, however, that accusations of *kufr* (blasphemy) are not innate to either the cultural or religious essence of our region. Many of the syncretic traditions found in local cultures had never allowed for such neat demarcations along religious identity. The anxiety over who is a Muslim (or even Hindu) began with the classificatory techniques used by the colonial state to define its subjects in broad, homogenous categories. These demarcations were necessary for 19th century colonial governance, especially for quotas, electoral seats and other resources to be distributed among different segments of population.

One of the responses to the pressure of demographics was the emergence of reform movements that aimed to purge so-called 'non-Islamic' rituals from the practices of Muslims. The aim was to bring forth a narrow definition of 'Muslim,' so that reformist leaders could legitimately claim to speak on behalf of the Muslim community and consolidate their numbers. The problem, however, was that the colonial era witnessed the growth of numerous proponents of Islamic reform, with each group claiming to be the 'true' representative of the community. Thus, the debates

between leaders of modern Muslim sects were sometimes as divisive as their debates with Hindu and Christian leaders, the former often over the precise definition of who was to be excluded (rather than included) from the Muslim community.

After Partition in 1947, with the Hindu ‘enemy’ removed, internal strife over the spiritual and political leadership of the Muslim community took center stage. Internal purging to reach the ‘essence’ of the community proved to be an unending process. In 1953, violent protests shook Pakistan to declare the Ahmaddiya community (one of the most active participants in the Pakistan Movement) non-Muslim, a demand that was accepted in 1974 by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s government following an insurgent campaign by religious parties. It was clear that religion was no longer a private, intimate, and at times transgressive relation between human beings and the Divine. [39] Instead, it was to be either sanctioned by the state bureaucracy through laws, identity cards or passports, or it had to be demonstrated publicly through rituals to satisfy the intrusive gaze of a suspicious public.

This politics of suspicion permitted General Zia-ul-Haq’s military regime to modify the colonial era blasphemy laws to solidify support for his illegitimate rule. [40] His amendments not only included the death penalty for blasphemy, but also allowed the interpretation of off-hand remarks as blasphemous regardless of the intention of speaker. Predictably, the passing of this law fuelled more accusations of blasphemy, which rose from less than 10 cases between 1947 and 1986 to more than 1,500 cases over the following 30 years. Its ambiguous language allowed people to weaponise such charges in a plethora of private conflicts, including many cases of property disputes. One of the most shocking abuses of the law occurred at a university campus in the city of Mardan in April 2017.

Mashal Khan, a student of journalism, was organising against the corrupt practices of the university administration. In response, the university authorities launched a smear campaign against Mashal, accusing him of blasphemy and placing him under official investigation – just one month after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called for a decisive crackdown on blasphemous social media posts. As a result, a mob of angry students dragged him out of his room and lynched him while dozens of police officers stood by. A state inquiry later proved that the blasphemy allegations



were entirely false. This gruesome incident highlighted the ease with which false accusations could be wielded to eliminate potential opponents.

Earlier in 2011, the then governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, was gunned down by his own bodyguard for criticising the blasphemy laws after Aasia Bibi, a working-class Christian woman, was jailed on blasphemy charges over a property dispute with her Muslim neighbours. Mumtaz Qadri, the guard who killed Taseer in broad daylight, was arrested and hanged in 2016 but became a hero for an ascendant Far Right. Similarly, Junaid Hafeez, a Fulbright scholar who returned to his native hometown of Multan to serve at a public university, has been rotting in jail for the past seven years. The reason for his unending ordeal is that he was accused of blasphemy by his colleagues who were jealous of his growing popularity among the student body. His lawyer, human rights activist Rashid Rahman, was killed by religious fanatics in 2014, prompting public figures to go silent on Hafeez's case.

### **Misrecognising the Enemy**

Jean Paul Sartre noted how authoritarian governments ensure that citizens never coalesce into a collective force and remain dispersed as individuals. Such atomized individuals are open to being subjugated, manipulated and used by small powerful groups that are well-organised both in society and within the state. These powerful groups can even use the public to commit gruesome acts of violence against vulnerable sections of society, giving the masses a form of collective existence subordinate to the petty interests of the ruling elites. The public is thus turned into a collectivity without an autonomous will. The mob and the riot remain potent weapons in the hands of the state as long as it can utilize them against its opponents.

We see a similar pattern of mass manipulation emerging in the guise of a symbiotic relationship between the Pakistani state and religious extremist groups. Our ruling classes require not only a perpetual political and economic emergency, but also a heightened social emergency that exploits the deep-seated cultural anxieties of the public. By fanning fear around an imminent dissolution of an imagined cultural purity, the authorities exploit a perverse longing for the past and use this anachronistic desire to target opponents and discipline potential critics. The result is the frequent use of violent threats against activists who dare to challenge the hegemony of the

ruling bloc. The rise of the Far Right goes hand-in-hand with the destruction of the progressive alternative.

As a result, we are witnessing the reduction of politics in Pakistan to moralisation and aesthetics. The moral crisis does not need popular mobilisation of the masses. Instead, it merely requires the policing of perpetually threatened ideological boundaries and identifying/targeting individuals who supposedly pose a danger to them. On the other hand, aestheticisation uses pomp and public displays of cultural assertion as a substitute for a material challenge to the domination of global capital and Western imperialism. Therefore, people find an outlet for their rage by controlling women's bodies and advocating religious purity, with periodic outbursts of spectacular forms of violence to cover up the intense emptiness that haunts their identity. The tragedy is that the more the society undermines its minorities, women and dissidents, the more it falls into material deprivation, facilitating more foreign domination that can only be "avenged" through murderous but deeply impotent violence against fellow citizens.

This is perhaps the greatest tragedy facing the cultural discourse prevalent today. Despite all frantic claims of masculinity, patriotism and religiosity, it represents nothing more than abject surrender in front of the challenges of modernity. Thus, we are condemned to not only obtaining the wrong answers, but also to asking the wrong questions. Instead of debating reforms necessary for social progress, we become obsessed with questions of cultural purity. Rather than finding ways in which we can overcome domination of imperialist powers today, we fixate over the modesty of "our" women. Our refusal to acknowledge the difficult challenges we face compels us to fight imaginary demons while ignoring the intensifying material decay that afflicts society. In other words, we are not even equipped to recognise the correct questions of our time, let alone begin the ardent journey of resolving the infinite knots posed by every question. We are condemned to an ahistorical, insular and self-punishing existence.

It is pertinent to remember the key lesson of psychoanalysis that there is nothing necessarily lacking or in excess in reality itself. It is our perception of that reality that decides whether there is a fault. The question of vulgarity is an extremely subjective question, as are debates on "too many migrants" in the West. What is disrupted is not reality (the universe could care less

about petty morality) but our perception of reality. In other words, we punish anyone who exceeds the framework of our perception while masquerading this subjective violence in the name of an absolute morality.

The liberal gesture of espousing values of tolerance and patience is hopelessly inadequate when confronted with the intensity of the social crisis and the accumulated rage among the public. What is foreclosed in all discussions on extremism is the possibility of building a progressive alternative to give expression to the genuine discontent of the public. German theorists such as Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin who experienced the catastrophic rise of Nazism in Germany, were perceptive enough to recognise how Nazis tapped into the unfulfilled desires of the masses, proposing to them a rupture from a decadent present, albeit one that ended up being a more insular and punishing repetition of the status quo. Authoritarianism feeds upon capturing emotions in the deep recesses of the public to turn them against each other, and eventually against themselves. The hatred for the vulnerable in the name of culture and tradition that we witness today in Pakistan is an extension of this suicidal tendency, caught between nostalgia for the past and envy for the present, a condition paralysing social progress.

To conclude, we propose the following thesis on the moral panic afflicting society:

*The failure of Pakistan's ruling classes to address the material needs of the public led them to use cultural anxieties as a tool for disciplining populations and suppressing political opponents. Women are the primary targets of this moral panic, as their bodies become sites for the restoration and preservation of an imaginary national honour. Moreover, religion is used as a cynical tool to police public discourse and eliminate potential opponents. Such anxieties generate an anachronistic critique of the West around cultural difference without addressing the material roots of imperialist domination or economic under-development. The result is an impoverishment of our public sphere as fear of imagined monsters replaces efforts at understanding and changing the world.*

## DEMOCRACY DEFERRED

*I don't know what happened. I left for school after having my breakfast in my home. But there was no home when I returned.*

11-year-old Arbaz, whose home in Gujar Nullah was demolished by the Sindh government

*Democracy for an insignificant minority, democracy for the rich—that is capitalist democracy.*

Vladimir Lenin, *State and Revolution*

On June 2, 2021, videos began circulating on social media of goths (villages) being burned down near Karachi by the private security of Bahria Town, the most powerful real estate group in Pakistan. The aim was to forcefully displace hundreds of indigenous villagers and capture their land for a luxury housing scheme. Later, more images surfaced of Sindh police facilitating Bahria Town by firing upon and baton charging the protestors. The gory scenes caused mass outrage as the violence was taking place on land deemed off limits by the Supreme Court of Pakistan; a land grab that was both mercilessly cruel and audaciously illegal. The Sindh government, led by the opposition and the supposedly progressive Pakistan People's Party, appeared to be completely in cahoots on this criminal activity, revealing the limits of our democracy.

Malik Riaz, the notorious owner of Bahria Town, exercises such blatant disregard for law because of his ability to dole out patronage to some of the most powerful institutions in the country. He came to the public's attention when a scandal broke out in 2012 regarding bribing Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry's son (Arslan Chaudhry) to win favours from the judiciary. Iftikhar Chaudhry became a symbol of democracy and rule of law when he was dismissed by the military dictatorship of General Musharraf in

2007, triggering the Lawyers' Movement that eventually forced Musharraf to resign and led to the restoration of the Chief Justice. Chaudhry's popularity plummeted as it became evident that he was involved in murky deals with real estate tycoons, leading to one of the most spectacular "rise and fall" stories of a public figure.

Riaz Malik, however, remained unscathed in the incident as the media went silent after the initial uproar. A video was leaked showing the real estate tycoon orchestrating planted interviews with the country's top anchors on national TV to improve his image. It also became public that Bahria Town is a source of lucrative post-retirement jobs for many senior officers of the Pakistani military. It is not surprising that the main defense for Malik Riaz in a corruption and land grabbing case in 2012 came from none other than the head of the ISI and the DG Inter-Services Public Relations, some of the most high-profile positions within the military hierarchy, confirming the tight relationship between Riaz and the military high command.

On the other hand, Bahria Town continues to expand and devour land in different parts of the country with a sense of purpose and urgency akin to a thirsty vampire. In Sindh, this manic drive for land and profits became intertwined with the feudal structure that shapes the province's countryside. An investigative report by Dawn revealed that Riaz Malik has a network of small landlords with considerable influence with the local police, which he used to forcibly displace peasants from their lands. He also controlled bureaucrats in the land revenue system who manipulated land records to provide a veneer of legality to his land grabs. These feudals are part of a hierarchy of landed elites who facilitate each other in combating resistance from locals in exchange for a cut in the profits made by Bahria Town (which could reach up to 2200 percent).<sup>[41]</sup>

The former President of Pakistan and Co-chairman of Pakistan People's Party, Asif Ali Zardari, sits atop of this pyramid of profiteering feudals. As a historical embodiment of the democratic opposition to the military establishment, the involvement of the PPP leadership with the country's most notorious land mafia fits into a longer history of corruption and compromises that has diminished the party's popularity in the public's imagination. On the other hand, the "anti-corruption" PTI government

wrote a letter to the Supreme Court of Pakistan in March 2021 asking for “relief” for Bahria Town from a 2019 Supreme Court judgment that fined the company Rs460 billion for illegal transactions with the Sindh government. Only Malik Riaz seemed to have the capacity to create such bipartisan agreement among two parties that are usually at loggerheads with each other.

These disparate and otherwise competing forces (the government, opposition parties, the military, judiciary and media) converged to protect Malik Riaz after progressive groups in Sindh held a protest in front of Bahria Town’s office in Karachi on June 6, 2021. They demanded an end to the colonisation of Sindh, the displacement of hundreds of villagers in the name of development, and accountability for Bahria Town’s excesses. Clashes broke out between the gathered crowds and the Sindh police, leading to the arrest of dozens of activists. Later, at the instruction of the Sindh government, protesters were charged with terrorism, a charge that would have been more suitable (but unimaginable) for all those who terrorise indigenous populations by stealing their land. Perhaps the worst excess of the state apparatus involved the Rangers barging into the house of Seengar Noonari, a leader of the Leftwing Awami Workers Party, and abducting him for participating in the June 6 protests.

The manner in which the entire state apparatus functioned like the private security guards of Malik Riaz indicates the monstrous power of the tiny oligarchy that controls politics and institutions in the country. What is truly scandalous is the haunting silence of media channels, which usually never miss an opportunity to repeat the mantra of “corruption.” Yet, since the Bahria Town issue involved the entire spectrum of the political and institutional elites, it did not get any coverage on national television. Even the courageous protests by supporters of Seengar Noonari in his hometown of Naseerabad received no mention, an absence that is more revealing of the system than all the sensationalised content available in the media. <sup>[42]</sup>

### **Crisis of Democracy**

An entrenched oligarchy rules Pakistan regardless of the faces at the top or the form through which the government is instituted. The differences between liberal and extremist, establishment and anti-establishment, democracy and dictatorship all melt away at the gates of Bahria Town. The

result of such episodes is that many stop believing in the very possibility of radical change. One is to accept that the only possible world is the world as it exists, one where few modifications are permitted if the general coordinates of its existence are not challenged. This is the stance of procedural democracy, NGOs and issue-based movements that aim for important reforms but are unable and unwilling to challenge the fundamental architecture of power. While proponents of this perspective claim to be realists, they face an incredible dilemma today; increasing inequality, climate change, biogenetics, artificial intelligence and other forms of social, economic and technological change render any notion of stability superfluous and redundant. In other words, it is perhaps more utopian to believe things will remain the same rather than to accept that we are on the verge of unprecedented transformations.

What is at stake in this debate is the meaning of the term democracy. Is it simply another name for managing the status quo, which in our case is the permanent state of emergency that exploits and dehumanises the population? If that is the case, what would be a strong case for democracy if the same system can be managed more efficiently by a ruthless dictatorship? Or can democracy signify a sustained and fierce commitment to popular sovereignty that aims at nothing less than the fundamental transformation of the status quo in favour of the people?

This question compels us to reflect on the history of the democratic movement in Pakistan. Here, we are again in danger of a conservative position masquerading as ultra-Leftism by refusing to acknowledge anything worth saving within our tradition. Such dismissal of the collective energies and sacrifices of multiple generations of political activists ends up depriving us of the tradition which has provided us with the language to critique the system. The category of “failure” used to denote these movements is suspect because it assumes that the struggle is over and that the unrealised dreams of previous movements do not have a subterranean existence in the present, inadvertently strengthening pessimism in society.

[\[43\]](#)

It is evident that we require a different approach to engage with the history of the struggle for democracy, one in which we critique its trajectory while acknowledging the collective debt we owe to the vision and sacrifices

of those who participated in emancipatory upheavals. This move necessarily requires us to have a view of the past as not a fixed and predetermined set of events that culminate in our uninspiring present. Instead, history also consists of all the potential trajectories of the past that *could have been*. Studying history as a dynamic and contingent process allows us to focus upon the essential stakes of the struggles in the past in order to deploy their lessons in pursuit of emancipatory movements in the present.

### **History of Resistance**

To begin with, one must remember that despite massive odds (with militarism, imperialism, fundamentalism), the Pakistani people have a glorious history of resistance against the permanent dictatorship installed in the country. This history of freedom has persisted in the most despairing of times and has undermined the designs of the ruling classes in most unexpected ways. As discussed in previous chapters, one of the most outstanding campaigns was launched by Fatimah Jinnah when she challenged General Ayub Khan for the presidential elections in 1964. In the midst of pervasive fear, the people responded to Ms. Jinnah's call. She would have become the first female President of a Muslim country had the generals not rigged the elections. The movement galvanised both the eastern and western wings of the country in an unprecedented display of courage and unity despite the eventual setback in the elections.

With a complete ban on political parties and the media, and with support from the US, General Ayub Khan's rule seemed impervious to any challenge. This arrogance led him to declare 1968 as the 'Decade of Development' to celebrate ten years of his dictatorship. Behind this façade of development, however, discontent was simmering across society. Wages for workers had been stagnant for 11 years, the Green Revolution had displaced hundreds of thousands of small farmers and civil liberties were non-existent. In a report that shook the regime, one of Pakistan's chief economists, Mahbub-ul-Haq, showed that just 22 families owned 66 percent of industrial assets and 87 percent of the banking sector, exposing the tiny elite that benefited from the so-called development. Worst still, the growing economic difference between the Eastern and the Western wings of



the country became monstrous, sowing the seeds for the disastrous violence in 1971.

Latent rage surfaced in November 1968 when a group of students were manhandled by the police at a check-post near Attock as they returned to their college in Rawalpindi. This seemingly minor and everyday instance of police brutality soon turned into a symbol of the authoritarianism that shaped the lives of ordinary people, particularly the country's youth. As students staged a protest against ill-treatment regularly meted out to them by state officials, a protestor named Abdul Hameed was shot dead by the Rawalpindi police. This gruesome murder enraged the country's youth. Campuses broke out in protests that were initially directed at the police, but the young activists soon expanded their horizon to demand better education, more representation and dignity for students. Various progressive student groups converged to form the Students Action Committee, an alliance dedicated to coordinating strikes and protests across the country.

This wave of youth militancy was supplanted by a wave of workers' strikes in early 1969 that paralysed the industrial sector of the country, proving that the working class was not particularly enthusiastic about the "growth" experienced in the national economy. Despite repeated repression by the military junta, the movement kept gaining momentum. By February 1969, large parts of Lahore were under the control of people's committees, spontaneous organs of popular power that sprang out of weeks of battles between state authorities and the people. Battles raged across the countryside as peasants and landless workers organised Kissan committees to challenge the social and economic stranglehold of feudals in the countryside and demand radical land reforms. Similarly, East Pakistan was swept by daily protests to demand a fairer share in the country's political economy, with Sheikh Mujib ur Rahman's Six Points Agenda (demanding political and economic autonomy) becoming a rallying cry for the Bengali youth.<sup>[44]</sup>

In West Pakistan, the anti-Ayub movement coalesced around the charismatic leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Despite his own involvement in the Ayub regime, Bhutto retained an exceptional ability to read the pulse of the people, or in his words, "the music and the rhythm of the times." His ability to weave together religious identity with the yearning for socio-

economic justice and political freedoms allowed him to bring together a formidable coalition that no Leftist leader could ever match. While the contradictions inherent in Bhutto's personality and the movement fuelled his downfall, his ability to articulate high politics in the vernacular transformed the political landscape of Pakistan by centering the concerns of the masses. The manner in which Bhutto advocated the rights of the working classes explains his enduring appeal in the masses despite the growing unpopularity of the PPP as the later leadership abandoned the founding socialist principles of the party.

The alliance between rebellious students, determined workers, courageous peasants and defiant nationalists was an explosive combination that shook the foundations of the Ayub dictatorship. The seemingly reformist demands of the movement became bolder over time, eventually demanding the unthinkable: the resignation of the military dictator. As the Ayub regime's violence and propaganda (including allegations that the movement was part of a foreign agenda) fell on deaf ears, his grip on power became weaker. Fearing further chaos, junior generals forced General Ayub to resign, installing General Yahya Khan as the interim leader who promised to hold general elections in the country.

This mass insurgency was part of a global revolt against the suffocation of capitalism, war, patriarchy and racism that marked the 1960s as an age of discontent. With its false promises of civilisation and progress, the developmentalist discourse was exposed as nothing but a mask for the unbridled quest for imperialist domination. It was a time when people, particularly the youth, lost interest in norms of the status quo, triggering a frantic effort to search for latent possibilities of a new, better society. Ending the age of political indifference and nihilist participation in the petty fetishes of consumer capitalism, this was an era where people believed another world was possible and that its construction had to begin in the here and now.

The popular upheaval also propelled marginal Leftwing parties in both East (Awami League) and West (Pakistan People's Party) to stunning electoral victories. Despite the horrendous violence of 1971, the momentum of the movement played a key role in liberating the Eastern wing from an increasingly brutal colonial occupation from the West. In what remained Pakistan with the independence of Bangladesh, the country was finally

given a constitution in 1973 that, despite all its faults, made an unprecedented national commitment to redistribution of wealth in society. Article 3 calls for an end to economic exploitation, while Article 38 demands that the state take responsibility for social rights. These examples are some of the traces of the popular upheaval that shook Pakistan in the late 1960s. The fact that these articles have been ignored by both democrats and dictators represents the declining power of progressive groups over ensuing decades.

Despite many setbacks in the 1970s, the dream of a new world continued to emanate from the minds of young people in Pakistan throughout the 1980s as they confronted the monstrous Zia dictatorship. Nine individuals burned themselves alive in Punjab in protest against the hanging of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979. Dozens of activists were killed in Dadu Sindh in 1983 as they attempted to foster a peasant rebellion against the military junta. One of the most heroic yet tragic stories from the period is of Shahida Jabeen, an activist from a working-class family in Lahore. Her young brother, Usman Ghani, was hanged in 1984 for allegedly being part of the proscribed Al-Zulfikar Organisation, a militant outfit created by Bhutto's sons in exile.<sup>[45]</sup> Shahida Jabeen herself was arrested for a year and tortured in the Lahore Fort, the notorious dungeon used by military dictators to target opponents. She lost her child and her livelihood during this period, and was forced into a life of financial precarity. Yet, even in 2021, you can see her at every demonstration in Lahore, exhibiting breathtaking pride and defiance in the face of unspeakable tragedies.

The incredible strength shown by such people can neither be reduced to an illusion (an incredibly condescending approach) nor can it be limited to the search for procedural democracy. These embodied the possibility of popular sovereignty, and the dignity that accompanies it. Standing up to the oligarchs and the Generals was a sign that a different politics was possible, premised upon the Will of the People. The horrific violence directed at these individuals by the counter-revolutionary state apparatus is an indication that they symbolised the ideas of freedom and dignity that posed a mortal threat to the logic of the status quo. The end of these emancipatory dreams coincided with the abrupt victory of imperialist forces globally after the fall of Berlin Wall, with neoliberal capitalism as the only possibility

presented to the masses. In Pakistan, this defeat was cemented not by the generals (who were always reactionaries) but by the democratic parties who assimilated themselves into the emerging consensus.<sup>[46]</sup>

### **Annihilating a Dream**

As discussed in a previous chapter, this process of assimilation and policing began with the first government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto when he chose to dismiss the provincial government of the Left wing National Awami Party and launched a brutal military operation against Balochistan. Similarly, the militant working-class movement that brought him to power was demobilised when Bhutto's government cracked down on striking workers in 1972, killing at least a dozen trade unionists. It was not long before Left wing leaders, including Meraj Muhammad Khan and J.A. Rahim (author of PPP's manifesto), were kicked out of the party to pave way for some of the most entrenched feudal landlords across Punjab and Sindh. Bhutto extended the counter-revolutionary apparatus of the state, while the oligarchy captured the party, resulting in the reproduction of the status quo initially challenged by Bhutto and setting the grounds for his own eventual demise.<sup>[47]</sup>

The return of democracy in 1988 after 11 years of Zia's dictatorship was full of promise for those who resisted the erasure of democratic norms in society during this draconian period. However, by that time, political parties were convinced that they could only function within the given architecture of power rather than imagining an alternative. As a result, rather than holding the military establishment accountable, the PPP leadership once again compromised with the generals in a power-sharing formula that kept the logic of the state intact. At the international level, deals with the IMF beginning in 1989 paved the way for a process of privatisation, speculation and austerity that accelerated and intensified the outrageous inequalities in Pakistan today. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, the party that rotated power with the PPP from 1988 to 1999, was at the time the organised expression of reactionary forces in Pakistan that had the full backing of the Pakistani establishment. As emancipatory dreams crumbled, both parties lost credibility in the eyes of the public, leaving a vacuum to be filled via General Musharraf's military coup, which was met with little resistance from the public.

Once again, the return of democracy in 2008 brought hope that things would turn out differently, now that major political parties had learned their lessons. There were some important gains made during this period, such as the introduction of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment during the PPP tenure, devolving power to the provinces, and PML-N's attempts to improve ties with India. Both changes were undermined by conspiracies from the establishment that viewed them as an effort to undercut its power within Pakistani politics. Unfortunately, however, serious attempts to build grassroots power were suppressed with the same cruelty as during the military regime. Balochistan and FATA were perpetually placed under the military's control as colonised spaces. Baba Jan (of Gilgit-Baltistan) and Mehr Sattar (of Okara), two of the most iconic figures produced by social movements in recent years, were incarcerated under terrorism charges during Pakistan's "democratic era," revealing the continuation of the logic of the permanent emergency during civilian rule.

Perhaps one of the most horrific abuses of terrorism laws was their application to crush striking workers in Faisalabad in 2010. The Labour Qaumi Movement, a group representing power loom workers in the industrial city, was leading the strike to demand the implementation of labour laws across the industrial sector. After a series of face-offs between security forces and protesting workers on the streets, the government accepted the demands of LQM. Immediately after the workers were demobilised, however, the Punjab government, headed by PML-N's Shahbaz Sharif, booked 15 workers under terrorism charges to wipe out the emerging labour movement, an accusation that completely erased the distinction between a terrorist and an agitator. These workers were given life sentences in 2011, and were only released in 2016 after the Lahore High Court overturned the judgment of the anti-terror courts. [\[48\]](#)

There is no longer any fundamental antagonism within the mainstream regarding the direction of the country. Sure, there are differences on who occupies the seat of the violent infrastructure of power and on who is left behind. Yet, there is an underlying consensus among all political forces regarding the elite-driven nature of the economy, the necessity to use militarised violence to control the masses and to manufacture phantoms to gain public support. This lack of an alternative ideological project partly

explains why the combined opposition of PPP, PML-N and other parties under the Pakistan Democratic Movement in 2021 not only failed to displace the puppet regime of Imran Khan, but also cut secret deals with the military. The PPP weakened the opposition by making alliances with pro-establishment parties in the Senate. The PML-N, on the other hand, has a dubious “two-camp” strategy, with one camp threatening the military with a popular movement and the other camp openly and secretly meeting the generals to become the new selected rulers of Pakistan. Both of these parties abruptly supported the Army Act 2020 that gave an extension to General Qamar Bajwa, the architect of the current hybrid regime, signaling that no one was ready to upset the sacred cows.<sup>[49]</sup>

It is clear that the link between procedural democracy and popular empowerment has reached a terminal point in Pakistan. This is perhaps true for most countries, including those in the West. Yanis Varoufakis deems the current moment as characterising a “techno-feudalism,” a system in which oligarchs have monopolised the financial, cultural and political lives of nations, reducing democracy to another name for managing an anti-people and exploitative system.<sup>[50]</sup> In Pakistan, the lack of a coherent alternative has given way to a pervasive sense of fatalism blocking all possibilities of a new imagination. To paraphrase Fredric Jameson, the nihilism of the contemporary era makes it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of crony capitalism.

The loss of a political horizon means that justice remains a virtue without an anchor and those who still dare to dream of emancipation are a people without a political homeland. While we can safely designate Imran Khan as a contemporary representative of the Deep State, we find it hard to identify an inspiring alternative. Sometimes we see the PML-N as the bastion of revolution, the PPP as liberal or even progressive, and even see the pro-Taliban Maulana Fazl ur Rahman as a leader in the struggle for democracy.<sup>[51]</sup> These gestures represent desperate attempts to locate a concrete entity that can correspond to our desire for emancipation. This approach creates false hope and prevents us from beginning the difficult but necessary task of imagining and constructing a new alternative force. But this is where we must begin, acknowledging the end of a heroic journey, the complete exhaustion of the current political forces to confront an

entrenched status quo, while holding onto the idea that change is still possible and necessary.

In light of the discussion, I present a thesis on the current state of the opposition in Pakistan.

*Pakistan has a glorious history of defying military dictatorships and asserting popular sovereignty. This resistance was represented both by popular left-wing parties as well as strong independent organisations of women, students, workers, farmers and nationalists in Pakistan. Over the past few decades, however, mainstream parties have compromised on key issues that could have opened the possibility of a radical alternative to the status quo. As a result, there is an unwritten consensus among all political actors on facilitating the oligarchy and reproducing the security state against popular resistance. Use of anti-terror laws against grassroots movements by democratic governments is an indication of the intensification of the permanent state of emergency. The abject surrender to the forces of the status quo represents the collapse of the opposition, triggering disorientation and fatalism among the public, a situation that undermines the movement for democracy in Pakistan.*

## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

*All resistance is a rupture with what is. And every rupture begins, for those engaged in it, through a rupture with oneself.*

Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*

*Without revolutionary theory, there cannot be a revolutionary movement.*

Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?*

The fear of Indian mobs was an essential element of British rule in India.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was emblematic of the fear induced by collective, defiant natives. British officials believed that Indians were too naïve to remain rational while gathered together in crowds, thus endangering law and order. Apart from brute force, the colonial government devised a number of strategies to control mobs and render them ineffective. One of the techniques used was tear-gas, a weapon of choice to disperse crowds today that was first used in colonial Punjab.

In a note written by the Inspector General of Punjab Police to the Under-Secretary of State to India in 1936, he makes the following observation on the efficacy of tear-gas in controlling crowds:

The extreme and unendurable irritation to the eyes, nose and skin is combined with complete incapacity for coherent action and an overpowering desire to abandon everything in order to shield the eyes and escape from the gassed areas...it breaks the cohesion of a crowd, reducing it from a dangerous unit with a common and constructive objective to a disorganised collection of individuals with nothing but the negative objective of the personal escape from the gas...The tactical principle underlying the action of military force in civil military disturbances is exploitation of the lack of cohesion, which is characteristic of a mob to effect dispersion, thus relieving the menace of assembled opposition. [\[52\]](#)



This form of ‘dispersion’ became a common method used in colonial police manuals to describe the eventual goal of police action against mobs. We are here presented with a process of transformation, minutely studied in its scientific detail, from a crowd passionately attached to its objective to a collectivity of individuals concerned with nothing but a negative interest of self-preservation within the confines of the gassed area. What is remarkable is that the ‘rational’ subject was not created through the exercise of critical faculties in a pedagogical process, but through disabling the sensory organs. This attack on collective action demonstrated the emphasis on breaking down crowds into separate individuals, a form of liberal atomisation produced through bodily pain.

At the same time, the colonial government attacked political figures who claimed to represent ideas. An example was in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, where political activists were given life sentences for possessing books of Lenin and Marx. Sir David Petrie, head of Indian intelligence in the 1920s, cautioned that the presence of communists in great numbers was not the key element required for a larger conflagration.

A mob, indulging in the kind of mass violence of which we had an unpleasant foretaste in 1920-22, does not require to be composed of convinced communists, but only of persons whose minds have been inflamed beyond all control; and that Communism is an exceedingly potent and subtle poison for exciting the mob-mind in such a way. <sup>[53]</sup>

The state’s fear was directed towards collectively organised citizens who could overcome their passive and atomised existence. More importantly, it was directed against individuals expressing ideas that give the people a sense of common purpose and commitment. The task of the counter-revolutionary machine of the state was to both demobilise collectives and to wipe out ideas that sustained them. As explored in previous chapters, the postcolonial state continues to build upon this colonial legacy by criminalising protest movements and systematically dismantling progressive ideas through repression and propaganda.

Therefore, to resist this onslaught from the state, we must rebuild organisations that can give the people a sense of collective belonging and generate radical political ideas that can sustain them. This essay proposes the contours for such a progressive project that can unite the public under a common purpose. My primary goal in this endeavour is to critically

interrogate Leftist political thought in Pakistan, a tradition that provides people's movements a historical and ideological anchor. Today, more than ever, we need a grand narrative to overcome the suffocation of insular frameworks and provide a course of action to fight for the affirmation of life itself.

### **Reactivating an Idea**

As discussed earlier, the defeat of previous phases of the people's struggle cannot be reduced to failure. Instead, it is better to view struggles as dynamic confrontations that keep recurring through different permutations across history. After the termination of a political process, there is reactivation of the same struggle under new slogans, new organisations and new faces adequate to the challenges of the time. Our task must be to reactivate the ideas of the Left by both celebrating the history of past struggles while rethinking their relevance in the contemporary conjuncture.

Much of the political thinking of the Left has been marred by a teleological view of history in which it was assumed that the development of capitalism will automatically produce contradictions that would lead to its demise and pave the way for a socialist society. This thinking dominated global Marxist thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as attempts were made to create a homology between the movement of history and transformations in politics. After the experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the collapse of the socialist camp, this quasi-religious belief in linear historical progression is no longer tenable. Today, we are witnessing the transmutation of global capitalism into neo-feudalism, with no global socialist alternative in sight, a situation that should induce much-needed rethinking among the Left.

Moreover, the loss of historical certainty is further grounds for re-evaluating the sociological categories through which the Left grasps social reality and understands political change. The category of the proletariat, the industrial working class, was viewed as the subject of history whose struggle was destined to overthrow capitalism. Struggles of other groups were important but only the proletariat was deemed capable of bringing revolutionary change in society due to its unique role in the production system. It is no wonder that these ideas originated in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the seat of industrial development and home to the largest proletariat in the

world. Today, however, this view is as obsolete as the belief in the notion of perpetual progress in history and hence deserves to be discarded. [\[54\]](#)

During the twentieth century, revolutionary movements in the colonial and non-European world became the principal theaters for socialist revolutions. While the labour aristocracy of the UK, France, US and other Western countries integrated itself into the imperialist camp, socialists in disparate countries such as China, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and other “third world” nations managed to defeat their ruling classes and bring Marxists to power. The primary sociological class that propelled Marxism to victory was not the proletariat but the peasantry, a group viewed as “backwards” by orthodox Marxist theory. By outpacing Western Communist parties in the revolutionary struggle, Marxists in the global South also posed a serious challenge to analysis that privileged the allegedly historical role of the proletariat and the centrality of Europe in global communism.

Since the 1960s, the arrival of feminism and environmentalism in popular consciousness has expanded our understanding of capitalism and the possible nodes of resistance to it. Feminists emphasise the key role played by women’s labour in social reproduction, making the fight against patriarchy central to defeating capitalism. Similarly, environmentalists caution against notions of development premised upon unsustainable production and waste that constitute a mortal threat to the stable functioning of ecological systems. Together with anti-colonial and anti-racist thinkers, they focus on the necessity of identifying multiple struggles that open up the possibility of fighting authoritarianism and exploitation in society. [\[55\]](#)

Yet, despite the massive transformations in practice over the past hundred years and the significant undermining of sociological and historical certainties, our theoretical frameworks remain frozen, severing the link between theory and practice. Many Marxists mistakenly view fidelity to old theoretical texts as a necessary element of revolutionary politics, even if those texts no longer correspond to the political questions of the time. My contention is that if one wants to maintain fidelity to a tradition, it is necessary to break from orthodoxy in order to actualise its potential in the present. In other words, theoretical infidelity is often a pre-condition for

practical fidelity to an ideology, since ideas must be re-evaluated in face of new contexts while firmly holding onto their principles.

Today, we need to think of politics as a creative process produced in relation to ongoing struggles rather than a sociologically determined phenomenon. Instead of imposing theory on reality, a situation that has led to totalitarianism in some cases or the total irrelevance of the Left in others, theory must continuously be reformulated according to the exigencies of the situation. In that sense, politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be viewed as more of an open-ended and creative element of art, rather than attempting to mimic the certainties of science. It must aim to bring together demands deemed impossible and movements categorised as criminal by the state. In effect, revolutionary politics is the art of the impossible. [\[56\]](#)

For such a creative process to work, however, it must be supplemented by a broader “worldview” functioning as a horizon by which to measure practices in the present. We will not be able to achieve much success if we try to fight a transnational right-wing with only micro-level resistances. And without the universalism of the Left, we will only be left with the universal horror unleashed by reactionary forces.

### **Politics of Equality**

French philosopher Jacques Rancière explains how the equality of all human beings must not only be the goal of politics but also must be its pre-supposition; i.e., all are born equal and deserve the same dignity in life. This simple axiom allows us to view the existing world as both cruel and absurd in how it creates distinctions on the basis of class, race, religion, gender and other identitarian categories to justify brutal forms of domination. Affirmation of total equality does not entail an insistence on the sameness of all human beings, since difference and multiplicity are facts of existence. Rather, it invites us to remove biases and prejudices from policy-making that create unnecessary obstacles for a vast majority of humanity despite no fault of theirs. [\[57\]](#) The principle of equality has had different names throughout history. Koinonia, Musawaat, Republicanism, Socialism, Communism, and a host of other names and traditions posit equality as the guiding principle of society. We must hold onto this essential principle and place it in a dialectical relationship with all movements challenging the pharaohs of our time.

Moreover, in order to construct political thought incongruous with the status quo, it is important to recognise and support existing movements that challenge major obstacles to freedom and dignity in Pakistan. We have explored these obstacles in this book, and the people's response to them can be understood as efforts to *defeat the permanent state of emergency that haunts Pakistan*.

The system's anxiety is rooted in social groups and classes that lack representation within the current configuration of power, who have been condemned to a virtual non-existence in national affairs. This includes the poor, most ethnic minorities, a vast majority of women and large numbers of progressives. Our authoritarian dispensation has constructed a worldview in which these groups and their sympathisers can only be seen as outsiders, foreigners, traitors and hence dangerous. While mainstream parties can be integrated into the system due to the social base of their leadership, the demands of certain social movements are impossible to accept without radically overhauling the entire system.

For example, PTM's demands to hold the military leadership accountable for its war crimes in tribal areas goes against the history of impunity for the Generals, an impunity that allowed them to butcher civilians from Bengal to Balochistan, overthrow elected governments and unleash mass repression on the media and democratic forces. Holding them accountable would mean traversing the undeclared taboos of Pakistani politics by ending the undeclared privileges of the establishment, opening a process with consequences nothing less than the reconfiguration of power relations in the country. The subversive potential of such demands explains why a peaceful and constitutional movement has been the subject of excessive state paranoia.

We witness a similar dynamic in other movements examined. The demand for student representation on campus challenges the complete monopoly of bureaucrats who control the education system and consequently control the minds and bodies of the youth. Freedom on campuses could quickly transform into challenging the very foundations of an order where questioning and critical thinking are off-limits. Workers fighting corporate bosses and farmers resisting the real estate mafia challenge the fundamental bias towards elites in our economic system that evicts the humanity of the poor by rendering them disposable in the name of

profits. Demands for land and labour rights as well as a redistribution of resources cannot be met without disempowering a small privileged class that continues to monopolise the country's wealth. The same is the case for the women's movement, whose assertion is a threat to the ideological substructure of society in which women's bodies symbolise a misguided sense of patriarchal honor.

These movements produce a classical dialectical antagonism between the world as it exists and the world as it could be, opening up space for a new vision of society. They disrupt the temporality of power, creating the potential for a new politics shared by all struggling for a common purpose.

### **Towards a People's Emergency**

Such a declaration of revolt opens us to an uncertain future since the available measures to judge a successful life and politics no longer apply. It does not guarantee ministerial positions and endless state patronage, as is the situation for those political leaders who choose to bow down before the ruling classes, allowing their being to become completely harmonised with the violence and indignity of the system. Those who break from the system, however, live their life out of sync with the rhythms of power, open to the counter-revolutionary violence the ruling classes have mastered. The anxiety of being unanchored in a punishing world is one of the main reasons why many choose to stay away from the difficult path of resistance or abandon it in the middle.

Today, this certainty provided by the system is also no longer guaranteed to even passive citizens. The rising unemployment and price hike is undermining stability for middle-class and working-class families in Pakistan. Moreover, the increasing violence against women and minorities and the infrastructural breakdown that affects the poor mean that one does need to be politically active to face authoritarianism, violence and injustice in Pakistan. Today, the state of Pakistan is a machine that produces anarchy and confusion in the name of security and order.<sup>[58]</sup>

One can argue that the desire for stability is an impossible desire for a vast majority in the country. The sheer exhaustion of playing the "good citizen" without any rewards in return is part of the reason why more and more people are beginning to question the system. Resisting our punishing

status quo appears more and more necessary and justified. As Mao used to say: it is right to rebel.

A unified struggle that constitutes a rupture from the system creates history, establishing a new measure for evaluating politics, life and the world. In that sense, the assertion of a politics of rupture creates a real emergency by articulating the needs of the repressed and invisibilised. Recall that we suggested that the Permanent State of Emergency imposed by the elites aims at restorative violence to ensure that nothing fundamental changes in the architecture of power. It essentially defends a conservative form of politics that views resistance as a threat to the reproduction of order. On the other hand, a politics from below imposes a real state of exception by aiming to transform the very coordinates of the social order.

The aim of a People's Emergency is to not only challenge specific policies or political entities but to rearrange the entire frame of reference through which we grasp politics, entailing nothing less than the creation of new communities of solidarity and redirecting popular rage to dismantle the system. If a people's movement is to gain momentum, it will rise above popular fixation on vulnerable sections of societies as enemies, instead directing legitimate anger towards the tiny group of elites and specific institutions that control the social, economic and political life of a country. A genuine break from the system not only overturns the policies of the former regime, but also builds a new prism through which to mediate social relations in the world and create a sustainable political system.

Therefore, we have two competing conceptions of the state of emergency: one in the hands of the ruling classes directed at maintaining the status quo and the other geared towards dismantling it. Both tendencies reflect an underlying assumption that the "normal" course of action in Pakistan is already irregular and arbitrary. What determines decisions are not fixed rules mediated by institutions but brute force at the service of the elites, who are capable of circumventing all legal obstacles in the quest for domination. This raw power can only be met with counter-power organised from below asserting new norms, laws and institutions embodying the values of equality, freedom and dignity. Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, such determined popular mobilisation has been understood as a "revolution."

## **Reform and Revolution**

Despite the pessimism of the contemporary era, it is essential to recognise that all the popular upheavals ushered in the modern era had their origins in mass revolts. Whether it was liberal democracy, as in the case of the American Revolution, Republicanism in the case of the French Revolution, anti-colonialism of the Haitian Revolution or a form of socialism brought about through the Russian Revolution, the term “revolution” denoted a point of radical departure from the preceding system and the construction of a new form of rationality and practice. Today, a new strategic axis is required to give impetus to revolutionary ideals, since without the concept of radical transformation we are only left with slight modifications to an uninspiring, decadent and painful present.

It is time to propose a new relationship between reform and revolution in order to move the dialectic of history forward. By reforms, we mean immediate tasks that can apparently be resolved within the confines of the system. For example, we can insist on the social, political and economic rights of all citizens enshrined within the constitution. Similarly, concrete reforms could entail employment opportunities, implementation of labour laws, and upholding housing rights, civil rights, the right to unionise, etc. In essence, there is nothing revolutionary about such demands, as they are simply efforts toward the implementation of existing laws or calls for slight modifications to the existing framework to ensure universal rights. Yet, these seemingly polite requests can inadvertently lead to much larger consequences than intended by the protagonists themselves.

Recall that we analysed the Pakistani state’s dysfunctional relationship to its own laws. The most obvious example is the myriad ways in which the constitution is disrespected in Pakistan by rigging elections and undermining powers of the parliament. If anyone tries to close the gap between the law and its practice (for example, a prime minister asserting power), it places the entire system in panic as it violates the unwritten rules of power. This reveals that even seemingly benign demands such as taking the written word seriously creates an emergency situation, as power is upheld by ignoring the constitution. This riveting tension between the semantics of law and the practice of power makes even seemingly reformist demands potentially subversive.

Whether it is the demands for minimum wages, land rights or protection of women or minorities, the status quo is structured in such a way that it



does not respect its own rules. Reforms are the only basis for popular mobilisation, as the masses do not come out en masse to enact socialism. Remember, the American Revolution was triggered by protests against an unjust taxation system, while the Russian Revolution was preceded by protests against food shortages. While the protagonists of these demands did not realise they were initiating historical processes, the insularity of the status quo and its inability to reform itself eventually triggered outright revolts in the name of these demands.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes how liberal democracy and global capitalism function today with a tacit understanding that despite repeated electoral battles, elected governments will not undermine the power of capitalism.<sup>[59]</sup> This means manifestoes become increasingly less relevant in politics, while the personal charisma of candidates takes center-stage, reducing politics to aesthetics. When people do choose differently, however, the global system swings into action to punish voters for their wrong choice. We know this history very well, as the US has instigated military coups against Left-wing governments across the global South.

An example is the socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile that was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup in 1973, leading to the 17-year reign of General Augusto Pinochet. Hundreds of Left-wing activists were arrested and killed by the US-backed military junta as it resolved to wipe out any challenge to the ruling classes. More recently, the Syriza-led government in Greece stunned the global oligarchy by winning elections in 2015 on an anti-austerity platform. Greece's creditors, known as the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF), used financial blackmail against the country in order to force the government to renege on its radical agenda. Syriza capitulated in front of the Troika and became a party of austerity, an abrupt reversal that not only wiped out the credibility of Syriza but also demobilised the mass movement that brought it to power.<sup>[60]</sup>

The lesson is that no serious reform agenda will win without overcoming a vicious counter-attack by the status quo. The need for a revolutionary perspective, i.e., the willingness to fight and defeat reactionary forces, is indispensable for any progressive change. There can

be no revolution without a reformist agenda, and no reformist agenda without a revolutionary perspective.

### **Building an Organisation**

As discussed, Pakistan's social and economic landscape is not only marked by repression, but also contains traces of heroic resistance. The tragedy is that political parties have failed to create an intimate relationship with social movements, a weakness magnified each time parties attempt to agitate against the hybrid regime. Social movements, including trade unions, simply choose to ignore political parties since they do not see any link between their everyday struggles and the intra-elite battles in politics.

On the other hand, movements that create a rupture from the status quo often find it hard to sustain themselves over time. This is partly because they do not enter the temporal sequences of the state (particularly elections) and maintain an existence parallel to mainstream politics. Similarly, many movements are unable to connect with other existing struggles, remaining single-issue campaigns. Both of these tendencies prevent movements from being co-opted by the state, as well as ensuring they remain focused on addressing the key concerns of participants. However, while movements put up a genuine resistance, they are unable to transform the politics of the country since the question of gaining power or forming popular unity remains elusive, leaving political power in the hands of parties run by oligarchies and backed by the military establishment.

In addition to establishing a new dialectic between reform and revolution, we must also build a new relationship between social movements and political parties. The primary task of a progressive political party is to bring together different social movements to form a coherent, alternative political project. Translation of the demands of social movements to the political register is a painstakingly difficult task since it requires finding the common essence behind disparate struggles. One of the most potent sources of authoritarian rule in Pakistan is the atomisation of the public, which makes them susceptible to a politics of hate and fear. The coming together of different communities and movements under a common agenda transforms fear into courage, and hate into solidarity, opening the possibility of a different kind of collective politics.

Indeed, politics is the art of transforming a specific issue into a symbol of universal suffering. For instance, the suicide by a Tunisian vegetable vendor was widely understood as symptomatic of the authoritarian governments in the Arab world, paving the way for the Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011. We have seen the symbiotic relationship between social movements and politics bring a number of progressive candidates to power over the past two decades. Communists in Nepal were able to build a coalition of the landless peasantry, urban workers and intellectuals to overthrow the despotic monarchy in 2007 and eventually form an elected government. Similarly, the Pink Tide in Latin America was made up of a number of popular movements that combined to form new parties that undermined oligarchic democracies and even resisted US influence. From Venezuela to Bolivia and Argentina to Chile, an alliance between marginalised nationalities, feminists, environmentalists, students and workers brought ordinary people to power against an entrenched status quo. The most recent example is of President Castillo Pedro in Peru, a teacher's union leader fighting for quality education for poor children. He formed a strong coalition with representatives of different organisations, and was nominated a Left-wing alternative candidate in this year's presidential elections. On June 6, 2021, Pedro stunned the world by beating a candidate from one of the wealthiest families in Peru and became the new president of the impoverished country, an incredible feat considering his humble origins and the enormous financial power of his opponent.

The aim of a Left-wing party is not to submit existing struggles to the theoretical and organisational discipline of the party leadership. Such attempts to control and direct popular movements have resulted in terrible consequences for both social movements and political parties as they arrest grassroots initiatives of transforming society in the name of party discipline. It is not necessary to impose ideological conformity upon different struggles. Instead, acceptance of plurality and heterogeneity within the political struggle is a source of strength as it allows for a broad alliance that can mobilise different sections in society.

Therefore, we require a more fluid conception of discipline in which the party exists among the people and works to bring together the different movements existing in society. Such a process requires both acceptance of differences between each movement, while also emphasising commonalities

that can allow actors from different campaigns to see a mirror in each other's struggles, enhancing the people's capacity to fight in the process. Indeed, this is also the only way in which authoritarian forces can be defeated. In Bolivia, for example, the military ousted the elected socialist leader, Evo Morales, in a US-backed coup in 2019. Mass mobilisation across society by different organisations meant that the regime was forced to hold elections in 2020, an exercise that led to the return of Morales' party to power.<sup>[61]</sup>

In Pakistan, there are daily reports of protests by various groups, demonstrating the potential of an alternative politics if their energies can be accumulated into a broader platform. Eventually, a party must be the site that collects, sustains and empowers the will of the people against the ruling classes. It also requires the transformation of this alliance into a political manifesto with broad agreement on the key issues that can unite the public and begin the necessary transformation of society. In a Gramscian vein, the party builds a new cultural, economic and political hegemony in society in order to construct an emancipatory dynamic radically different from the dehumanising logic of the existing world. In effect, we require *unity in rupture* among different groups to resist and defeat the organised forces of authoritarianism in society. Only organised, united, disciplined and aware people have defeated rogue regimes in the past. This coalition of the brave and committed is also our only hope to end the nightmare imposed upon our land for too long.

We conclude our discussion on the way forward with the following thesis.

*Pakistan's present is haunted by the absence of a political platform that can bring together disparate forces of resistance into a radical and coherent political alternative. We require a creative organisation that can weave together radical movements into a force that resists the suffocating status quo. Only a revolutionary entity willing to fight and defeat the entrenched status quo has any chance of ushering in a new era. While the current state of emergency is imposed to defend a decaying status quo, such an organisation will be able to declare a people's emergency geared towards building new institutional, economic and ideological horizons for Pakistan.*

*Therefore, the struggle for emancipation in Pakistan must be historical in nature, rupturing from the past in order to build a new society.*

## CONCLUSION

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Our discussion points to a disturbing realisation. In Pakistan, the social contract between the state and the citizenry stands suspended for all practical purposes. We are witnessing burgeoning fiefdoms of real estate tycoons, corporate elites, militarily occupied zones and religious bigots. As a result, the rule of law is paving way for arbitrary governance influenced by the whims of the powerful. The system is upheld by the military establishment that accuses dissidents of being traitors and is ever-ready to use brutal violence against those who refuse to toe the line. In this configuration, ordinary citizens remain atomised with the only common factor among being fear, whether it stems from state institutions, unaccountable elites, religious extremists or even each other.

Such spectacular collapse of even notional adherence to principles usually associated with political modernity is not restricted to Pakistan alone. Theorists such as Jodi Dean are arguing that the world is returning to “neo-feudalism,” a new combination of economic oligopolies and political authoritarianism that makes democracy redundant. The vast power of tech giants, the introduction of private militaries in the form of security companies and the monstrous inequalities have undermined a sense of collective belonging across the world. The nation-state, no longer the horizon of citizenship or popular sovereignty, is becoming an organised tool of oppression against political opponents, with unprecedented surveillance capacities that would put many dictators to shame.

This increasing authoritarianism is matched by an unprecedented convergence of crises on a global scale. The world economy never really recovered from the economic crisis of 2008 when the pandemic violently disrupted it, a public health crisis that exposed the fragility of our global order. Our existence is under mortal threat by the ongoing climate catastrophe that threatens to undermine the fundamentals of our civilisation, if not erase our species from the planet. The rapidity of these multiple crises

has not only terrorised the public but also paralysed our thoughts, making it harder for us to imagine a way out of our current predicament.

As a result, human beings today are reduced to terrified spectators of their own demise. We know the world is in the midst of multiple disasters but we are unable to do much to stop them, a tragic helplessness at a moment of great catastrophe. Fear and anxiety make the public susceptible to mass distractions manufactured by the system. At times identifying with a decadent celebrity culture, with billionaires who fuel fantasies of escaping to space, or excessively hating vulnerable groups such as women, minorities, immigrants, the system keeps providing new points of fixation to the public as it undermines the basis of life on the planet.

These diversion tactics are a desperate attempt by the public to avoid the truth of their own emaciation in political affairs. Today, feelings of fear and helplessness pave the way for a cynical attitude in which we are forced to show enthusiasm for a world that we know has failed. The resort to fatalism forecloses the search for alternatives while imprisoning our actions and thoughts within the narrow confines of our present. This suffocating presentism means that the only future available to us is an apocalyptic one in which the brutal ethics of survivalism undermines all ideals that have enthused humanity over the past many centuries. Today, we either feel that it is too early to challenge the status quo because our side is weak, or we feel it is already too late since the disasters have overwhelmed future possibilities.

To face this numbing combination of fear and fatalism, we require a new subjectivity that can reopen emancipatory horizons for us. As a conclusion of our discussion, let me suggest two aspects of such a subjectivity that would be crucial; courage and an enlightened impatience.

### **Finding Courage**

French Philosopher Alain Badiou notes that courage is the most important virtue of our times since it corresponds most closely with the logic of a rupture from the status quo. It expands both individual and collective identity, demonstrating that human beings are worthy of more than what the system allows them to be if they incorporate themselves into a genuine political project. Badiou also makes a crucial distinction between heroism and courage. The former is often a momentary burst of bravery in the face

of an immediate danger, such as standing in front of the police during clashes. Heroism is glorious, but is often momentary and hence does not necessarily lead to a transformation of an oppressive situation. Indeed, in our current disorienting times, much of the activism is akin to fleeting expressions of solidarity to numerous causes, a form of radical consumerism that does not require long-term commitment to any specific cause.

On the other hand, courage is a sustained intellectual and practical commitment to radical transformation, identifying time as its raw material. While movements create initial ruptures from the system, they face the worst forms of intimidation from the state apparatuses including physical violence and blatant propaganda. Holding onto one's principles in the midst of counter-revolutionary violence defines courage in the political domain. It is exemplified by those intellectuals who never succumbed to the "End of History" thesis and kept their focus on the unfinished tasks of history. One is reminded of Pakistan's political prisoners, many of whom endured years of imprisonment in the lonely dungeons of military dictators. Their refusal to surrender despite the pain and suffering they faced is what kept alive alternative possibilities in the darkest of times.

Such capacity for endurance means that we are not merely passive objects to be worked upon by the dominant ideologies of our era. Instead, if we incorporate ourselves into a grand project, we can build a new conception of life premised upon the dignity of the people. Courage is what allows a revolutionary to swim against the tide of time, drawing a wedge in the heart of history.

At the same time, we need a sense of urgency considering the complete collapse that is staring us in the face. Apocalypse is no longer an event in the future. It is an ongoing process, one which we are living through. A vast majority of our youth has no prospects for social mobility, religious and ethnic violence is on the rise, the housing crisis is becoming more acute, while Pakistan remains the 5<sup>th</sup> most vulnerable country to climate change. To make matters worse, 90 percent of Pakistan's water is contaminated, air pollution has enveloped our major cities in the form of smog, turning the elements of life into symbols of death.



Without a resolution of these massive dislocations within our social, environmental, and economic life, our polity will continue its slide into a dystopian future. The only group that is benefitting from this disastrous system is the separatist elite that has become suicidal in its quest for quick profits at the expense of social destruction. A world threatened by hunger, unemployment, disease and mass displacement can only intensify the logic of class separatism, a phenomenon that can only be sustained through increasing surveillance and militarisation of Pakistan.

### **Towards an Enlightened Impatience**

We must assume a subjectivity that corresponds to the urgency and the intensity of the catastrophe we face, a subjectivity that I would term “enlightened impatience”. This does not entail recklessness as the word impatience would imply. Instead, enlightened impatience suggests not only an urgency of action, but also the need to develop new categories for understanding the crisis of our contemporary moment. It implies intellectual and physical labour directed at dissecting the precise nature of the emergency we face and building a strategic axis to fight it, an endeavor in which description of the situation leads to new prescriptions for challenging it. It is a revolutionary task today to reorient the masses from the manipulation being imposed upon them by those who wish to see the continuation of the status quo.

Therefore, it is important to link enlightened impatience and courage. Enlightened impatience aids us in recognising the dire situation we find ourselves in and prompts us to commit to a strategic axis. Courage allows us to endure the consequences of our commitments over time. Together, they permit us to challenge the supposed inevitability of a dark future and begin the process of writing a new script for our country, and for humanity.

To confront the paralysing power of dystopian inevitability, we must reconstruct the power of new utopias. As Fredrick Jameson notes, Utopias are not necessarily abstract forms of thinking bordering escapism from the hard realities of the world. Instead, utopias can have a concrete material basis when they are posed in opposition to the impasse of the status quo. It is an indication that the current problems can no longer be contained within the framework of the existing system and require us to pose a different set of coordinates to resolve the issue. For example, consider the problem of

the youth bulge, the increasing army of young educated people who no longer find a place within the system. All the political forces claim to speak for the youth, but the acts necessary for the resolution of the crisis requires a much stronger commitment to radical change.

The discontent and disorientation of the youth is connected to the entire infrastructure of power that makes their lives disposable for the myopic policies and fictions of the ruling classes. The elite-nature of our economy, the militarisation of everyday life, the lack of political stability, the insistence on ideological conformity and the increasing criminalisation of dissent together create conditions in which young citizens feel alienated and disgruntled. Without transforming these conditions or at least imagining a scenario in which they can be overcome, we are left with empty phrasemongering by the elites. In other words, it is more utopian to think that things can change within the status quo than to propose bold alternatives in which it is plausible to resolve these tensions.

We are today in search of such materialist utopias that allow us to repose the very questions we face, providing an alternative trajectory for the development of our social, cultural, economic and political life. Since we are in the midst of an exceptional collapse, it is urgent to think of bold ideas in order to jump start the process of emancipation. At the risk of sounding pretentious, we must accept that our actions will become meaningless if they are not connected to a grandiose idea that can induce a rupture from history as it exists. As argued throughout the book, we require nothing less than a fundamental overhaul of the system in both materialist and ideological terms, a departure that allows us to not only rethink the contours of our society but to also reimagine our own individual identities.

Today we are faced with a hybrid regime that is rewriting history while punishing any form of dissent. Workers, farmers, students, journalists, women rights activists, ethno-nationalists and even mainstream politicians who challenge the ruling elites are immediately termed traitors. Simultaneously, the unrelenting extraction of resources and exploitation of the public is being carried out at the whims of one of the most decadent elites in our region's history. With the swift dismantling of our constitution and the rise of gangsterism, our descent into a catastrophic future is being hastened. Under the incompetent and cruel watch of our military establishment, the only destiny for our people appears to be that of a slow

suicide from the outrageous blunders being made on both the domestic and the foreign front.

Despite increasing repression, the growing economic, political and social crises make the current ruling configuration perpetually weak and unstable. To paraphrase Chairman Mao, the reactionary forces are nothing but paper tigers who can be defeated. Our task is to tear away the multiple masks that distract us from identifying the enemy and build a popular will for a new order. 220 million people cannot always be forced to live in humiliation, indignity and fear. The only realist choice today is to fight back against the chaotic status quo with a grand vision for the future. In this necessary confrontation between the old and the new, nothing less than the collective destiny of our people is at stake.

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# [1]NOTES

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## Introduction

. See Louis Althusser. *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

[2]. For a detailed analysis, see Ayesha Jalal. *The State of martial Rule*. (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990); Farzana Shaikh. *Making sense of Pakistan*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2018); Kamran Asdar Ali. *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics and Class Activism in Pakistan, 1947-1972*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Akbar S. Zaidi. *Issues in Pakistan's Political Economy*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ali Raza. *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India*. (Lahore: Folio Books, 2021); Saeed Shafqat, Philip Jones, Tabinda M. Khan, Tahir Naqvi, Anushay Malik, Johann Chacko, Asad Liaquat et al. *Pakistan's Political Parties: Surviving Between Dictatorship and Democracy*. (Lahore: Folio Books, 2020).

## Chapter 1: Permanent State of Emergency

[3]. The Punjab Disturbances began in 1919 as a direct response to the demobilisation of soldiers after the First World War, rising economic insecurity and greater demands for Indian autonomy. It signaled the beginning of anti-colonial movements across the Asia and the Middle East, suggesting that the war had not ended but only begun in the colonial theatre. See Kim Wagner. *Amritsar 1919: An Empire of Fear and the Making of a Massacre*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

[4]. Nasser Hussain. *The Jurisprudence of Emergency: Colonialism and the Rule of Law*. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2003).

[5]. The term “passive revolution” was initially coined by Italian communist Antonio Gramsci to describe the development of capitalism in peripheral countries that did not witness an “active Revolution” like the French Revolution that could overthrow the remnants of the old order to constitute bourgeois society. Instead, the old and new coalesced and collided as capitalism made inroads into these societies without necessarily destroying existing social relations. Indian scholar Partha Chatterjee takes this concept to describe transformations in India as it navigated the contradictory pulls of economic growth and electoral democracy. In the case of Pakistan, scholar Hamza Alavi has suggested how the lack of a bourgeois revolution led to the ascent of a “military-

bureaucratic oligarchy” that ultimately controlled key political and economic decisions in the country.

The gap between formal independence and the persistence of socio-economic bondage found expression in a communist party circular in 1948 that stated “*Ye Azaadi Jhooti hai*” (This freedom is a farce) while also prompting literary critiques by the likes of Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Saadat Hassan Manto. See Partha Chatterjee. *The Nation and its Fragments*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Hamza Alavi. “The state in post-colonial societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh.” *New left review* 74 (1972): 59.

[6]. Even today, the state continues to target dissenters by accusing them of being traitors. See chapter 5.

[7]. Some of this history is vividly captured in Kamran Asdar Ali’s brilliant book on the communist movement in Pakistan. See Kamran Asdar Ali. *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics and Class Activism in Pakistan, 1947-1972*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[8]. Modi’s fascist government in India has weaponised the accusation of “Pakistani agent” to delegitimise resistance to his movement. Most famously, it accused students from Jawaharlal Nehru University of being Pakistani agents as they protested for civil liberties. The redefinition of nationalism to suit interests of the ruling classes is one of the key features of authoritarianism of our era. See Shruti Kapila. 2016. “Once Again, Sedition is at the Heart of Defining the Nation”. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/politics/once-again-sedition-is-at-the-heart-of-defining-the-nation>

[9]. The Pakistani state’s decision to align with the US at the height of the Cold War played a key role in demonising the worker’s movement in Pakistan and strengthening authoritarian tendencies within the state. The US used its “allied” countries, from Latin America to Indonesia, to pursue a reactionary anti-communist politics in the Third World. Unfortunately, Pakistan’s ruling elites became willing partners in the proxy war between the Soviet Union and the United States. See Tariq Ali. *The duel: Pakistan on the flight path of American power*. (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

[10]. Another example of this disorientation is the current situation in Afghanistan as the US-backed regime was replaced by the Taliban. From government ministers to retired generals and mainstream journalists, there was euphoria over the Taliban victory, presenting it as victory of “faith” over liberal decadence. This celebratory tone is bizarre considering Pakistan was a frontline state against the Taliban movement, revealing the schism between official policy and the strategic preferences of the “Deep State”. Ammar Ali Jan and Tabitha Spence, “The US is to Blame for the Destruction of Afghanistan,” *Jacobin*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/08/afghanistan-war-joe-biden-taliban-pakistan-refugee-crisis>

## **Chapter 2: Controlled Democracy**

[11]. The process of courting and grooming young politicians for future leadership roles is an integral part of developing leadership in liberal democracies. Political and corporate interests hedge bets on particular leaders who they think can best protect the interests of elites. In Pakistan, this process becomes particularly transparent as the military establishment not only openly sides with leaders it has chosen, but also directly intervenes in the electoral process to ensure its favourites win.

[12]. One is often tempted to think why the establishment bothers to go through with the tedious process of election engineering that causes so much waste of public expenditure. Why not simply take over the government in Islamabad and establish an Arab-style dictatorship? Perhaps the answer is that Pakistan is too diverse a country with a deep history of protest and electoral participation since colonial times. It would be ungovernable if regional elites are not given adequate power at the local level, a power-sharing strategy that has worked since limited democracy was introduced by the British under the vice regal system.

[13]. The extra-legal and coercive nature of corporate and feudal power in Pakistan means there is a universalised sense of guilt among the elites. The result is that anyone can be held “accountable” if the establishment chooses to blackmail them for political purposes. For a deeper historical overview of how politics has been managed by the military in Pakistan, see Ayesha Jalal. *The State of Martial Rule*. (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1990).

[14]. The most biting criticism of Imran Khan’s current politics is available in his speeches from his time in the opposition. He frequently attacked the Generals for undermining Pakistan’s sovereignty and openly called for accountability of Generals. His U-turn on this key issue is disappointing but consistent with elite politics in Pakistan. For an in-depth account of how the PTI changed over the years, see Tabinda Khan. “Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf: From a Movement to a Catch-All party.” In Mariam Mufti, Sahar Shafqat, and Niloufer Siddiqui, eds. *Pakistan's Political Parties: Surviving between Dictatorship and Democracy*. (Lahore: Folio Books, 2020).

### **Chapter 3: Class War**

[15] Human Rights Watch. 2019. “‘No Room to Bargain’: Unfair and Abusive Labour Practices In Pakistan.” [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/pakistan0119.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/pakistan0119.pdf)

[16]. See M. K. Daud, Muhammad Nafees, Shafaqat Ali, Muhammad Rizwan, Raees Ahmad Bajwa, Muhammad Bilal Shakoor, Muhammad Umair Arshad et al. “Drinking Water Quality Status and Contamination in Pakistan.” *BioMed Research International* 2017 (2017).

[17]. It is difficult to exaggerate the blatant manner in which the poor are being robbed of their meagre resources by the elites. One can go to any working-class neighbourhood and witness the effects of this destruction and hear horrifying stories of disease, unemployment and police brutality. It is incredible that this class difference has not found adequate representation within the political sphere. See this excellent report compiled by Dr. Hafiz Pasha. Hafiz A Pasha. 2020. “The Three Ps of

Inequality: Power, People, and Policy”. Pakistan National Human Development Report. United Nations Development Program.

[18] 4. Ali Cheema and Maha Rehman. “COVID-19 Pandemic’s Economic Burden in Pakistan,” *Mahbub ul Haq Research Centre at LUMS*, 2021, <https://mhrc.lums.edu.pk/pakistan-dialogues/covid-19-pandemic-economic-burden-in-pakistan.html>

[19]. The recent attacks on Chinese workers in Balochistan are a grim reminder of the manner in which Chinese investments have been handled by the Pakistani government. Countries in Latin America have often praised China for its willingness to listen to local concerns while planning economic investments. Yet, the myopic vision of Pakistan’s ruling classes in which they chose to marginalise oppressed nationalities has made the entire enterprise secretive and controversial, bringing in a heightened sense of insecurity around CPEC projects.

[20]. Ahmad Rafay Alam, Ali Usman Qasmi, Fizzah Sajjad, Tabitha Spence, Umair Javed, and Ammar Ali Jan, “Remaking a River: Land and Profit along the Ravi,” *DAWN*, June 13, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1629117/remaking-a-river-land-and-profit-along-the-ravi>

[21]. The military’s direct role in financial investments has taken a large sphere of economic planning outside the ambit of public discussion. Anyone who dares to cross the line by mentioning military’s financial impunity is subjected to allegations of being anti-Pakistan. These coercive methods are also used to crush the trade union movement fighting for legal rights. We live under an economic emergency geared towards exploiting the poor. For a detailed study of Pakistan military’s financial empire, see Ayesha Siddiqa. *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan’s Military Economy*. (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

[22]. The book makes a provocative argument that the stability of the international monetary system depends upon the First World’s access to cheap commodities in the Third World. In other words, suppressing prices and wages in the Third World is a necessity for international development, thus making poverty a necessary structural feature of global capitalism. See Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik. *A Theory of Imperialism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[23]. Not only did these wars destabilise Pakistani politics and radicalise society, they also undermined the economic fabric of the country. Political volatility in the country has been a concern for foreign investors while aid dependency has derailed plans for long-term economic planning, effectively turning Pakistan into a neo-colony. See [https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters\\_18/Annex\\_IV\\_Impact%20of%20War.pdf](https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_18/Annex_IV_Impact%20of%20War.pdf)

[24]. Not letting Pakistan collapse is a geo-strategic necessity for global powers, for now. Yet, it is abundantly clear that such a situation is not tenable for a country’s long-term economic viability.

[25]. Karl Marx. *On the Jewish Question*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

#### **Chapter 4: Manufacturing Identity**



[26]. Refusal to accept Bengali peoples' right to cultural assertion provided the template for ethno-nationalist politics in Pakistan. The Pakistan Movement was strongest in Bengal and many Bengalis saw the apparent contradiction in simultaneously holding onto their national, religious and linguistic identity. Yet, the Pakistani state demanded an impossible form of "integration" from the Bengali intelligentsia. Over time, denying Bengali identity became intertwined with ruthless economic exploitation of the Bengali people, a fact later accepted by politicians and generals across the political spectrum. Thus, it is only natural that the struggle against economic exploitation merged with the fight against national oppression. Members of oppressed nationalities today continue to simultaneously express demands for economic rights and cultural recognition. See Hamood ur Rehman Commission. "The Report of the Hamood ur Rehman Commission of Inquiry into the 1971 War as Declassified by the Government of Pakistan." (2001).

[27]. Muhajirs were perhaps the most dominant ethnic group in the early years of Pakistan. Over the past few decades, however, a host of issues combined to limit their politics to ethnic conflict in urban Sindh. Muhajir youth have faced repeated violence from the state and today symbolise one of the least politically represented communities in Pakistan. For an in-depth study of Muhajir politics, see Oskar Verkaaik. *Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[28]. The key feature of this narrative is how it completely wipes out any event that may not fit into the teleological narrative culminating in the nation-state. This is why ruling ideology does not merely change the future, it also distorts the past to insert it within a larger narrative of history that justifies the contours of the present. See Khursheed Kamal Aziz. *The Murder of History in Pakistan*. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel. 1993).

[29]. The student mobilisation in November 2019 led by Progressive Students Collective and Students Action Committee was a milestone in propelling the consciousness of our youth. I hope someday more is written on the subject, especially by those involved in the mobilisation. For a brief overview, see Natasha Japanwala, "Love and Power: The Revival of People's Politics in Pakistan," *Al Jazeera*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/12/4/love-and-power-the-revival-of-peoples-politics-in-pakistan>.

## **Chapter 5: We The Seditious People!**

[30]. A few months, social media accounts related to the military establishment released photos of Tabby depicting her as a CIA agent. Such allegations betray an exaggerated fear of the unknown and an unhealthy propensity to view the world through conspiracy theories.

[31]. Another bizarre twist in the tale occurred when I was brought to the police station before being presented in a court. For those two hours a number of police officers asked me how they could get admission abroad for a Master's program. Some of the older officers wanted guidance from me

on how to get their children admitted to Forman Christian College, where I was teaching at the time. I jokingly responded that you guys could have asked me to come for career counseling in a politer manner, leading to awkward laughter in the room. For me, apart from institutional fragility, these events highlighted the possibility of finding our common humanity under difficult circumstances.

[32]. The inability of the state to accept that Pakistan is composed of different nationalities remains a source of intense anxiety for our ruling classes. Even today, when many Pashtuns insist on their cultural and historical linkages with Afghanistan, the only response by the state is to label this factual representation as treason. Such accusations are alienating an increasingly large number of young people from the peripheries. See for example: Abubakar Siddique. *The Pashtun question: The unresolved key to the future of Pakistan and Afghanistan*. (London: Hurst & Company Limited, 2014).

## **Chapter 6: Moral Panic**

[33]. In recent days, the country has again been shocked by gruesome incident of sexual violence. The brutal murder of Noor Mukaddam in Islamabad, the incident of 400 men harassing a helpless woman in Minar-e-Pakistan and a host of incidents involving child abuse show that society is experiencing an incredible form of social decay. Rafia Zakaria, “Noor of our Nation,” *DAWN*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1637330>

[34]. See Rubina Saigol. *Feminism and the Women’s Movement in Pakistan*. (Islamabad: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2016).

[35]. One of the worst features of the current regime is the hostile environment it has created for women journalists. A number of journalists are routinely targeted online by supporters of the regime in a strategy akin to Trump and Modi supporters in the US and India respectively. They are accused of pushing “fake news” to undermine the country’s reputation, particularly regarding women’s rights. The criticisms often reach vitriolic levels in which senior members of the government themselves participate. The events led some women journalists to lead a campaign #AttacksWontSilenceUS that captured the national media’s attention. Some of the most prominent women in the campaign, Benazir Shah, Reema Omar, Natasha and Mehmal Sarfraz are now doing a show called Aurat Card where they discuss a wide variety of political and cultural issues, including the pressures faced by professional women in contemporary Pakistan.

[36]. See Partha Chatterjee. “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialised Women: The Contest in India.” *American ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 622-633.

[37]. This confusion shows that reality in Pakistan increasingly resembles satire. See Nadeem Farooq Paracha, “Malala: The Real Story (With Evidence),” *DAWN*, October 10, 2013, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1048776/malala-the-real-story-with-evidence>

[38]. See Judith Butler, “We need to rethink the category of woman,” Interview by: Jules Gleeson, *The Guardian*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/sep/07/judith-butler-interview-gender>

[39]. For a thorough understanding of the issue, see Ali Usman Qasmi. *The Ahmadis and the politics of religious exclusion in Pakistan*. (London: Anthem Press, 2015).

[40]. Asad Ahmad has done excellent work on the politics behind the blasphemy law. See Asad Ahmad, “A Brief History of The Anti-Blasphemy Laws,” *Herald*, October 31, 2018, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1154036>.

## **Chapter 7: Democracy for The Rich**

[41]. See Naziha Syed Ali, “Bahria Town & Others: Greed Unbound,” *DAWN*, September 28, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1503689>. Also: Fahim Zaman and Naziha Syed Ali. “Bahria Town Karachi: Greed Unlimited,” *DAWN*, April 18, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1252809>.

[42]. The case of Gujjar Nullah is similar where the Sindh government tore down homes of poor slum-dwellers on the instructions of the Supreme Court. The same Supreme Court had earlier issued orders to regularise the illegally built farmhouse of the prime minister at Bani Gala (Islamabad). The double standards led protestors to chant “Bach alia Bani Gala, Tor diya Gujjar Nullah” (They saved Bani Gala but they tore down Gujjar Nullah”. See Shah Meer Baloch, ““Where Should We Go?': Thousands Left Homeless as Karachi Clears Waterways,” *The Guardian*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jun/16/where-should-we-go-thousands-left-homeless-as-karachi-clears-waterways>

[43]. Alain Badiou in his work *The Century* critiques the category of “failure” by suggesting that it looks at the past as frozen moment that is over. If that were the case, all scientific experiments that failed in the past would be irrelevant to discoveries in the field. In fact, this progress depends on these so-called failures for the paths they opened and foreclosed. He argues for a similarly dynamic view of political history in which failure in a political moment can lead to success in the future if the right lessons are learnt from it. See Alain Badiou. *The Century*. (Oxford: Polity Press, 2018).

[44]. The military operation against the Bengali people can be viewed as a broader response by the state to the increasing militancy of the Bengali working class and intelligentsia. The events should be studied in detail to understand the extent of violence our state is willing to commit against its own citizens to suppress their mandate.

[45]. See Nadeem Farooq Paracha, “Al-Zulfikar: The Unsaid History,” *DAWN*, April 9, 2010, [www.dawn.com/news/813223/al-zulfikar-the-unsaid-history](http://www.dawn.com/news/813223/al-zulfikar-the-unsaid-history)

[46]. The final victory of any ideology is not the elimination of opponents but forcing them to accept its frames of reference.

[47]. The relationship between the Left and the PPP is a complicated one. It became the only party brought a populist agenda centering concerns of ordinary people at the forefront of national politics. At the same time, the organisation was filled with members of the ruling classes who opposed the radical direction of the party. This tussle remained operative internally throughout the 1990s. From 2008, however, one can say that this contradiction has been resolved in favour of members belonging to the ruling classes. See Phillip E. Jones “Pakistan People’s Party: From Populism to Patronage.” In Mariam Mufti, Sahar Shafqat, and Niloufer Siddiqui, eds. *Pakistan's Political Parties: Surviving between Dictatorship and Democracy*. (Lahore: Folio Books, 2020).

[48]. See Human Rights Watch. 2019. “‘No Room to Bargain’: Unfair And Abusive Labour Practices In Pakistan.” [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/pakistan0119.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/pakistan0119.pdf).

[49]. See Asad Hashim, “Pakistan Passes Bill Legalising Extensions For Military Chiefs”. *Al Jazeera*, Jan 8. 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/8/pakistan-passes-bill-legalising-extensions-for-military-chiefs>

[50]. Capitalism and liberal democracy have been part of the teleology of Western politics for the past 150 years. The argument was that if the free market is allowed to operate, it will eventually induce democratic reform, and vice versa. Varoufakis argues that the current system can no longer be called capitalism because of the unprecedented monopolies created by some companies, the centrality of rent-seeking and the availability of free money to private corporations by central banks. The combination of these disparate factors has led to an elite that resembles more closely to a feudal nobility rather than entrepreneurial capitalists. If capitalism has been replaced by a new form of feudalism, it also means that liberal democracy will remain in a state of perpetual crisis as feudal structures are less tolerant of dissent. Saving democracy today means overthrowing techno-feudalism. See Yanis Varoufakis, “Techno-Feudalism Is Taking Over,” *Project Syndicate*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/techno-feudalism-replacing-market-capitalism-by-yanis-varoufakis-2021-06>.

[51]. The failure of Pakistan Democratic Movement is a recent example. The movement brought together all mainstream opposition parties on a common agenda to fight the hybrid regime. Yet as the political temperature rose after massive protests, each political player began vying to cut their own deals with the establishment. This does not rule out working with other political forces to fight the establishment. However, it reminds us of the necessity of an independent Leftist position so that it is never hijacked by mainstream leaders.

## **Chapter 8: What is to be Done?**

[52]1. See Ammar Ali Jan. “A Study in the Formation of Communist Thought in India, 1919-1951”. (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2018).

[53]. Ibid

[54]. Certain strands of traditional Marxism had a positivist understanding of history in which industrial development was equated with revolutionary potential of a society. In the twentieth century, however, the shift of revolutionary theater to the colonial world. The absence of the proletariat led to novel debates on the theory of the subject. Alain Badiou, for example, has worked on the theory of the Event. His insight is that genuine, egalitarian politics begins with a subtraction from the laws of the world by presenting those who are not represented within the logic of the world. Their politics, therefore, cannot be deduced from sociological categories alone. Similarly, Bruno Bosteels is working on the tradition of communes and “communism” in Latin America to highlight both the similarities and differences with radical thought across global space. His work shows the myriad ways in which radical ideas ranging from communism, anarchism, psychoanalysis and feminism were rethought by militants in specific political conjuncture. See Bruno Bosteels. *Marx and Freud in Latin America: politics, psychoanalysis, and religion in times of terror*. (London: Verso Books, 2012).

[55]. These are brilliantly mapped out by Razmig Keucheyan in his book on contemporary critical theory. See Razmig Keucheyan. *Left hemisphere: Mapping contemporary theory*. (London: Verso Books, 2013).

[56]. Daniel Bensaïd made this point as he worked out the possibility of revolutionary politics after the failed “predictions” of revolutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Undertaking an ethical politics without guarantees is the primary task of our era. See Daniel Bensaïd. *Marx for our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*. (London: Verso Books, 2002).

[57]. See Jacques Rancière, Davide Panagia, and Rachel Bowlby. “Ten theses on politics.” *Theory & event* 5, no. 3 (2001).

[58]. Alternatively, today only a powerful Left can guarantee stability and security to the people of Pakistan against the perpetual disorder manufactured by the State’s war machine.

[59]. The Slovenian philosopher reads Hegel’s dialectical method as positing this tension between official discourse and the practical reality of the masses. Revolutions begin when people start insisting upon rulers to meet their official obligations. Failure to do so can trigger an intensification of contradictions in which the entire system begins to be questioned by those in power. See Slavoj Žižek. *Less than nothing: Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism*. (London: Verso Books, 2012).

[60]. See Panagiotis Sotiris, “Why Syriza’s Defeat Still Haunts the Left,” Interview by: George Souvlis, *Jacobin*, Feb 18, 2020, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/02/syriza-greece-left-troika-brexiteu-gramsci>.

[61]. See Álvaro García Linera, “Former Bolivian VP Álvaro García Linera on How Socialists Can Win,” Interview by: Martin Mosquera and Florencia Oroz, *Jacobin*, April 5, 2021, <https://www>.

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